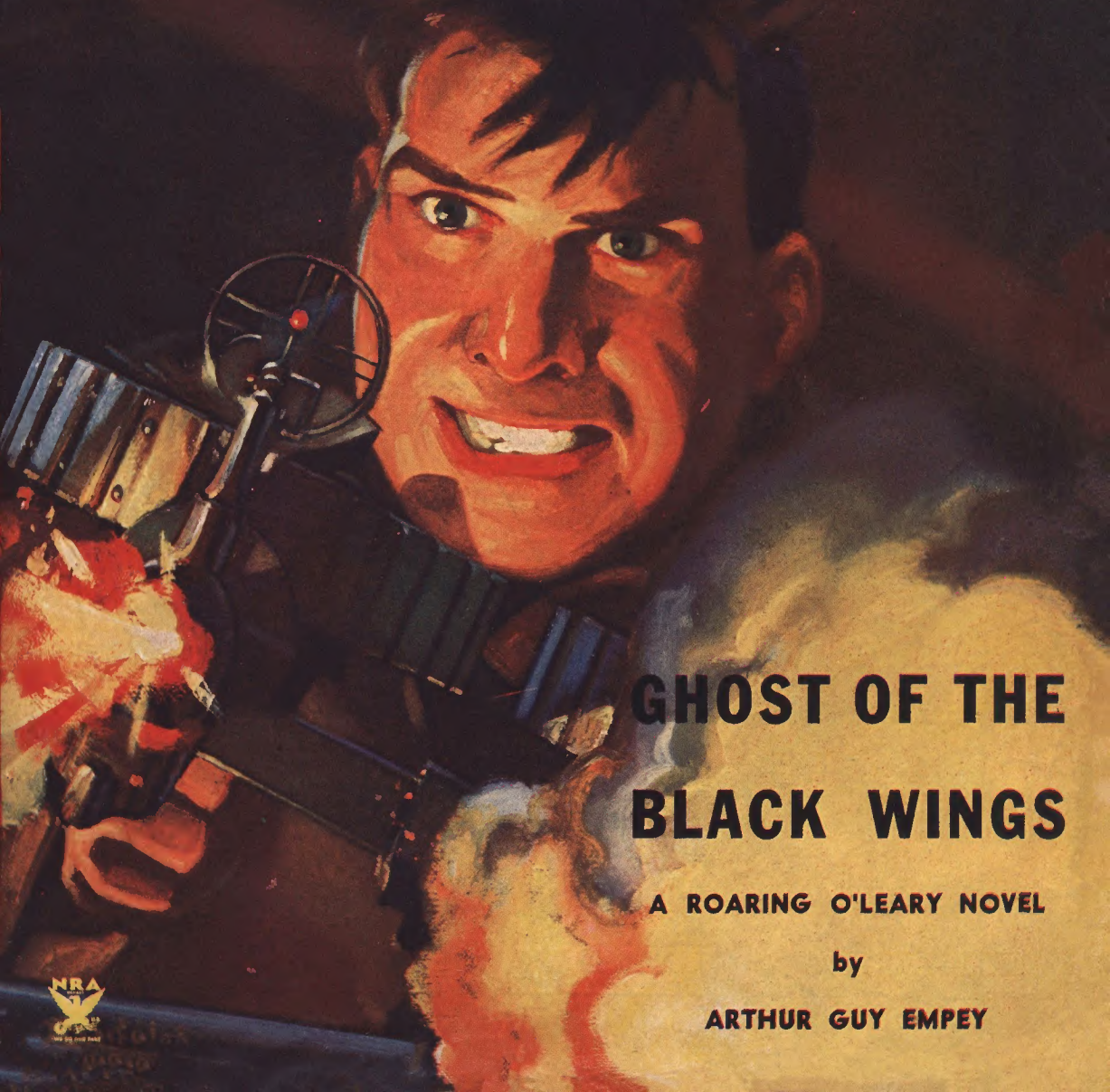
10¢

THE OLDEST AIR WAR MAGAZINE

WAR BIRDS

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

MARCH



GHOST OF THE BLACK WINGS

A ROARING O'LEARY NOVEL

by

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

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offer these **MOST SENSATIONAL VALUES**

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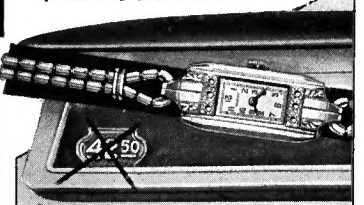

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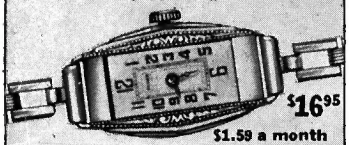

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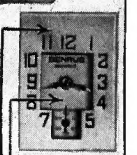
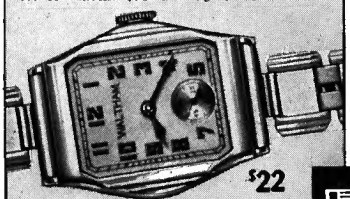


Unbreakable sunken glass

Engraved Numerals on metal face



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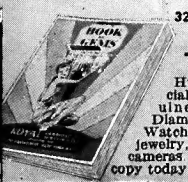

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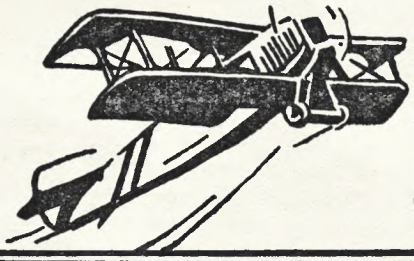

WAR BIRDS

Vol. 24 March, 1934 Whole No. 72

THE OLDEST AIR WAR MAGAZINE

GHOST OF THE BLACK WINGS (Complete Novelette) ..... *Arthur Guy Empey* 6

In the Black Roc's lair there were secrets that were worse than death. O'Leary knew it would be his last flight—yet when the war crashed around his ears it took more than secrets of the Black Chamber to ground his wings.

TRIPLE TROUBLE ..... *Barry Grace* 44

It was back to Blooey for Slim if he lost another ship. When he fought to save that last one he found friends and enemies on his tail.

PATH OF GLORY ..... *Burke McArthur* 56

Too old to fight they rode his wings for a fall. It wasn't until he handed them the Baron's tail numbers that he proved the color of his courage.

PARTICIPATING IN A GREAT NAVAL BATTLE 67

A page of fact in cartoon.

CHALLENGE (Complete Novelette) ..... *Arthur J. Burks* 68

It was his boast that no German who flew could beat him. When he faced Berger he found that even the strongest wings know when to fold.

FAMOUS DOGFIGHTS (True Feature) ..... *W. E. Barrett* 92

The story of a mighty fight between McCudden and von Kendall.

STAFFEL OF STEEL ..... *Curtis Mitchell* 96

Ships of steel they were and death rode their wings—rode it until Rio Gillette tried the trick that was new.

LUCKY STIFF (True Feature) ..... *Bill Alexander* 112

He was the luckiest man in the war and he proved it like no pilot ever did.

THE COCKPIT ..... *War Birds Officers* 116

Gather and hear the latest news of your squadron.

DEATH RIDES THE NIGHT (Cover Design) ..... *Rudolph Belarski*

For story behind this month's cover design, see page 93.

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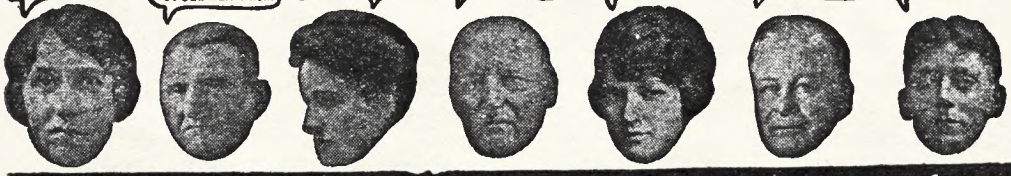

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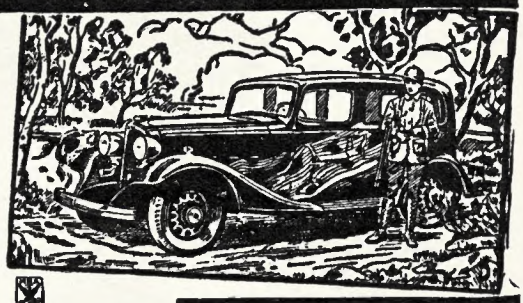

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31x5.25-21	3.25		1.15	33x5	3.75	1.45
28x5.50-18	3.35		1.15	35x5	3.95	1.55
29x5.50-19	3.35		1.15			
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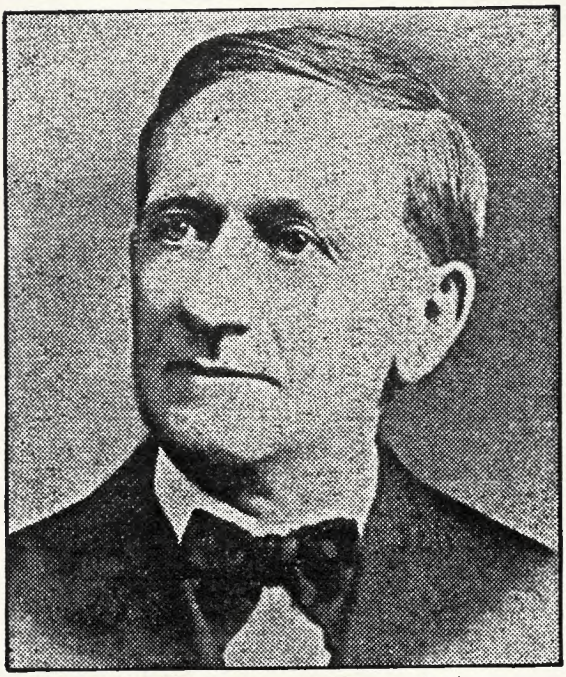

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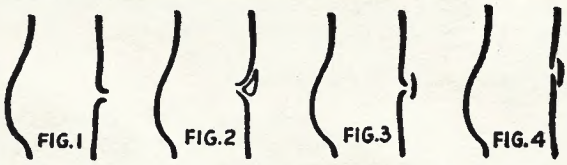

Shows rupture before *old-style* truss was applied.

Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. A cure is improbable.

Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

Shows perfected invention in place. *Note* how edges are drawn together in *normal position.*

PROOF!

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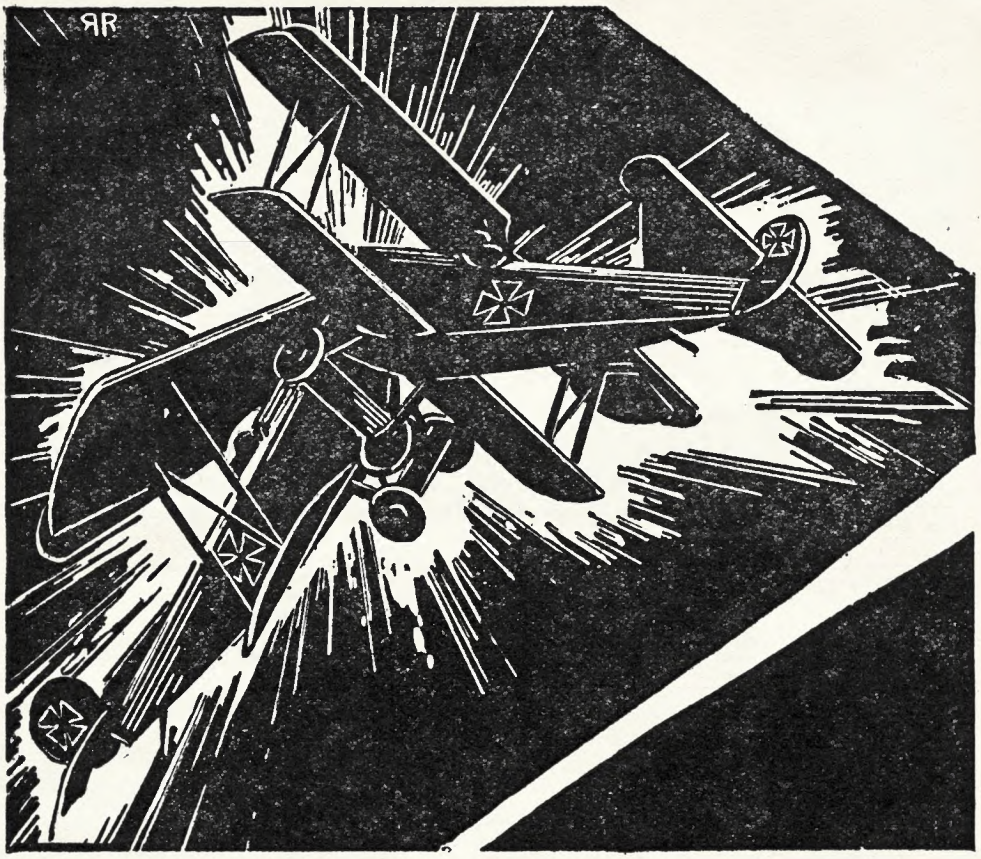
The Black Roc dropped from O'Leary's ship and all Hell broke around his ears.



GHOST OF THE BLACK WINGS

By ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

O'Leary Knew That It Meant Worse Than Death to Fly to the Black Roc's Lair. He Knew It—and Yet When the War Crashed Around His Ears, It Took More Than the Secrets of That Dread Black Chamber to Ground His Mighty Wings.

FIFTY miles due west of Commercy was the aerodrome of the 411th Pursuit Squadron, or Black Wings, as these flying hell hounds were known.

Slicing through the night, a limousine, two stars decorating its radiator flag, raced along the highway in a cloud of swirling dust. On two wheels it negotiated a perilous turn off the road and came to a grinding stop in front of operations. Open flew a door and Major-General Burdick hurried into the squadron commander's office. On his heels were the Chief of Wing and Thomas Richards, of U. S. Intelligence.

"Cripes!" The general's chauffeur wagged his head. "Hell must be poppin' to make the Old Man hustle."

Captain Wilkey, commanding the Black Wings, rose from his desk in surprise at the abrupt entrance of the headquarters officers. Only a matter of vital import would bring the division commander to the aerodrome in such haste and concern. True that he had telephoned for three ships, with Pilot Terence X. O'Leary in command, to be held in readiness for a bombing flight, but that in itself was nothing unusual.

"THERE'S hell to pay. Sit down, everybody." General Burdick plumped himself in a chair. "Wilkey, are the ships ready to take off?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"But you don't know the objective. Well, it's a mammoth shed in the aerodrome of the Black Circus. That shed must be wiped out of existence before daylight."

"That's impossible, General Burdick. The Black Circus aerodrome is guarded day and night by enough Fokkers to destroy the strongest air armada we could possibly muster, to say nothing of the anti-aircraft guns massed in the vicinity. What chance would two De Havilands and a Spad have?"

"Five pilots and three planes cannot be considered where thousands of American lives are at stake, and possibly the smashing of our concentration against Montsec."

"Thousands of American lives?" ejaculated Captain Wilkey incredulously. "Smashing our concentration against Montsec?"

"Precisely. Count Joseph von Krassner, Germany's most noted war-scientist, a fiend of invention, has been in command of the Black Circus for two months now." Captain Wilkey's eyes widened in startled amazement. "This inhuman monster —mad as a hatter—is responsible for poison gas, liquid fire and the rest of the hellish inventions. To him, destroying enemy morale is the most potent factor in the winning of a war. State your end, Richards."

"Through intelligence channels," gravely informed Richards, "we just learned that this madman is prepared to annihilate our entire division. It sounds incredible, I admit, but the source of my information is so reliable that we must accept it for the gospel truth."

"You mean that his distorted brain has invented a new horror?"

"Yes. The fiend is now ready to launch against us a powerful agent of destruction which dwarfs anything that has gone before. North of the Black Circus hangars is a colossal sheet-iron shed which houses the secret. As General Burdick stated, that shed and its contents must be effaced before daylight."

"What other fliers besides O'Leary have you selected?" Nervously the general chewed his unlighted cigar.

"Flight Commander Halstead and Pilot Grantland in one bomber, sir, and Pilots Peterson and Wright in the other. O'Leary solo, in his Spad."

"What's that I hear about O'Leary being gifted with night-sight?"

"There's a strong rumor to that effect in the squadron. If he can see at night, he certainly has kept it a secret from me."

"Call him for instructions."

"O'Leary isn't here yet."

"Not here? Where is he?"

"I didn't receive your message until after he had left for Commercy. I am now trying to locate him by telephone."

"A pretty kettle of fish. What's he doing in Commercy?"

"The leading ace of the Sky Riders, one Peter Maher McGuffy, sent a challenge to O'Leary this afternoon. It seems that McGuffy considers himself the light-heavy champ of the air service. O'Leary disputes the claim. McGuffy hangs out in Commercy and—"

"Good grief!" General Burdick bit clean through his cigar. "Seeking a *fist* fight, and a *war* on. Burn

the wires until you locate the dratted fool."

In a corner an old, loud-ticking grandpere clock suddenly stopped. Captain Wilkey stared blankly at the timepiece.

"Somebody's forget to wind it?" demanded General Burdick.

"Nobody forgot, sir," solemnly replied the squadron commander. "The night Lieutenant Reade and his four pilots were killed it stopped the same way. It is a warning not to send O'Leary and his men on this impossible errand."

"Absurd. Silly superstition! Thought you had more sense."

HARDLY had the general spoken than a blinding glare sheeted the windows, instantly followed by a terrific concussion that shattered panes of glass and rocked the building to its foundations. Then blackness. The blast had extinguished the electric lights.

"Good Lord!" cried the general. "They're bombing us!"

The four officers dashed outside. From the motor transport, south of them, red flames licked hungrily at the sky, painting it a dancing crimson. But there were no planes in that crimson sky.

Black Wing pilots, pouring from their quarters, hurriedly donned helmets and goggles as they darted to their ships being rolled out on the tarmac by excited crews. The squadron siren screamed and screamed. Captain Wilkey ran to the deadline to take charge.

Amid a bedlam of roaring exhausts and shouted orders, Spads climbed into space and frantically searched the air for the unseen destroyer.

"It couldn't have been a shell," declared the Chief of Wing, "because we would have heard its whine. Also, we are out of artillery range."

"If not a shell," asked Richards. "then what was it?"

"Yes, what was it?" burst from the division commander. "Out of a black and silent sky it struck. No sound of exhaust. Can—can it be that Count von Krassner has—"

Berrummpp!

Hangars six and seven, on the west end of the aerodrome, split wide open with a searing flash and vomited geysers of splashing fire into the heavens. The heavy detonation knocked the three officers sprawling. Dazed, they clambered unsteadily to their feet and stared at the raging conflagration.

"Another one," gasped the general. "And I didn't hear, or see, a damned thing. God! This is awful. Uncanny."

"General Burdick, may I use your car?" cried the Chief of Wing.

"Yes, yes, Stilson. What for? Where are you going?"

"To the motor transport. To—" His voice was drowned by the crackling of the flames as he dashed to the limousine.

They saw him snap out an order to the chauffeur and jump into the car. The limousine leaped forward, swung around and sped for the burning buildings.

Just as it reached a group of men fighting the roaring flames it was blotted from the watching officers' sight by a staggering burst of red. The earth seemed to crack open. Once again the mysterious destruction had descended.

Thrown to the ground by the concussion, painfully the general and the Intelligence officer got up and shaded anxious eyes from the glare of the ravenous flames.

The limousine was a wreck; smashed as though it had been a matchbox crushed under the iron heel of a giant. Decapitated, the body of the Chief of Wing, a shapeless, bloody mess, lay in the wreckage, while that of the chauffeur, a section of the shattered wheel still gripped in lifeless hands, hung head downward from what was left of the front seat.

"Stilson gone," groaned the general. "And Jim, the best driver in all France."

Over their heads Black Wings circled and banked, fruitlessly searching for the invisible murderers of their comrades.

Captain Wilkey rejoined the division commander and together they inspected the damage for some clew to the mysterious source of devastation. Unsuccessful, solemnly they returned to operations. The telephone buzzed and Captain Wilkey answered it. Shaking his head, he turned to the division commander.

"Sir," he informed, "division headquarters was destroyed exactly at ten o'clock by a mysterious explosion. Your executive officer and five of your staff were killed, as were several enlisted men. What are your orders?"

"Tell them to carry on until I return, Wilkey." The general sighed heavily and added, "if it is written for me to return."

LANTERN in hand, a very much frightened orderly stumbled in. Behind him trailed a Black Wing pilot, carrying a message bag.

"Sir," the pilot faltered to Captain Wilkey, "Harvey, Birch and I were talking together on the tarmac. This bag dropped from the sky, nearly hitting us. Not a sound of a ship did we hear, nor did we see anything. Then those terrific explosions."

"Open the bag and read the message, Richards," ordered the general quietly. Richards read aloud:—

Captain Claude H. Wilkey,
Commanding the 411th Pursuit Squadron

Count Joseph von Krassner, now known as the Black Roc, presents his compliments to those who are about to die. France dared to assault Montsec and was taught a bitter lesson in blood and munitions. Impregnable, Montsec still guards the gateway to the north. You upstart Americans also shall be taught a lesson even more sanguine than that of arrogant France.

Silently, unseen, my gigantic Death Rocs of Hodur shall rain death and destruction upon you from the skies.

"The damnable fiend!" General Burdick banged the desk. "So his mad brain is responsible for this havoc."

Tensely the Intelligence officer continued:

When I am ready, your bases, ammunition dumps, supply depots, mobilization centers, batteries, trenches, lines of communication, cities, towns and hospitals shall be turned into a chaos of fire and explosion unprecedented in war.

And I, Count von Krassner, the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, shall personally direct this air holocaust. When I have destroyed your division, my Death Rocs shall sweep the rest of you Americans back into the sea.

Richards paused to clear his clogged throat.

"Go on," rasped General Burdick. "Let's have it all." Richards resumed:

What are my Death Rocs of Hodur? The roc is a fabulous bird of prey of enormous size and colossal strength. But even the roc itself is dwarfed by my destroying juggernauts. Hodur, the Norse god of night, works with the Fatherland. To you who believe in the supernatural, it is unnecessary to warn you to beware. To you who doubt, destruction awaits.

(Signed) Count Joseph von Krassner,
The All Powerful,
Emperor of the Skies.

"Supernatural?" The general swore. "Another of his attempts to destroy morale by appealing to the superstitious."

"There is still more," informed Richards. "A postscript."

This is but one of many messages dropped this night into your lines. To prove to the doubting that the god of night is on our side, at three o'clock tomorrow morning the Death Rocs of Hodur will destroy your largest ammunition dump. Then ten minutes later will rain death and annihilation upon one of your main highways.

"God save us," groaned the general. "If the fiend is not boasting, the war is lost."

"Though mad, Count von Krassner is not given to boasting," declared

Richards. "Here is further proof." And he continued:

> By this time you must be convinced. At ten o'clock tonight, I shall destroy the headquarters of Major-General Burdick, your division commander.
>
> First, I shall wreck your motor transport, then six and seven hangars, to be followed by another stroke at your demolished motor transport.

For a space the officers sat rigid. General Burdick grabbed the telephone.

"Destroy our largest ammo dump at three o'clock? That means Fleurs. And ten minutes later blot out a main highway?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Richards.

"Do? Order into the air every available plane in the sector to guard Fleurs and its air approaches, as well as our highways. The mad fiend wouldn't have added that postscript if he weren't equipped to carry out his threats. And you, Richards, telephone your agents in Commercy to find O'Leary and bring him here by plane. We must strike first."

"You intend to send five men and three ships against him after this proof?" asked Captain Wilkey. "Five gnats to fight an elephant?"

"I do. O'Leary hasn't failed us yet. Get him, and damned quick."

CHAPTER II

DEATH MISSION

EIGHTEEN kilometers southeast of St. Mihiel and twenty-one southwest of Montsec, in a fork of the highway nestles the town of Commercy.

Blissfully unaware of the tragic demand for his presence in the 411th Pursuit, O'Leary sat at a table in an estaminet. And was he sore? Just wait until he found Peter Maher McGuffy, self-appointed light-heavy champ of the air force.

He downed his cognac and growled like a Royal Bengal tiger that had swallowed a bumble bee.

"Said I can't fly a baby carriage with wings on it, eh?" he ranted. "Can't dint a cream puff with brass knucks? Glory be! I'll put diapers on the Irish hyena."

Keenly the enraged Irishman scanned the stream of soldiers continually rushing into the saloon, then back to their outfits temporarily halted on the traffic-congested highway passing the door.

Suddenly he stiffened. A spic-and span aviator of about his own size and build had entered. The breast of the flier's tailor-made uniform was hung with ribbons of valor, including the starred insignia of the Congressional Medal of Honor. He came directly to O'Leary's table.

"So you are the Sky Duck?" he demanded. "What are you doing so far away from your duck pond? To my disgrace, you and I are even in Germans brought down. Your score is thirty-two, is it not?"

"Not Sky Duck, but Sky Hawk. Yes, me dear *Mister* McGuffy, me score is still thirty-two. And whin I brung down thim thirty-two, I was flyin' a baby carriage with wings on it."

"I was under the impression that you couldn't fly a baby carriage, even if it had wings."

"Glory be! What a pleasant time me an' ye is gonna have. Thin there was somethin' about me not bein' able to dint a cream puff with brass knucks."

"A nice, warm, newly-born cream puff, to be precise."

"Ixactly! What size diapers do ye wear? I'm thinkin' ye kin do with some."

"Six and seven-eights. And your size?"

"Eight and sivin-sixths. I've heard ye claim that ye're nifty with yer dukes. The champ o' the air."

"Quite true! If all the Black Wings I have flattened were laid in a row they would reach from Commercy to—"

"Commercy," supplied O'Leary caustically. "I'm hopin' it kin be

arranged, Mister McGuffy. Fer instance, in a nice quiet spot with nobody around."

"It can."

Of all the nice quiet spots in Commercy they picked one under the bedroom window of Brigadier-General "Saw Tooth" Huston, the sweetest-dispositioned brass hat in La Belle France. And under the sleeping general's window they went to it like jungle cats doctored with turpentine.

It took six M.P.'s to part them, but only one guardhouse to hold them. They were confined in the same cell, but the police soon recognized their mistake and rectified the error by separating the combatants.

An M.P. lieutenant and five privates—the lieutenant was taking no chances—came for O'Leary and escorted him to a waiting De Haviland. The Irishman was ordered into the monkey-seat.

"Drop this gorilla in the 411th Pursuit," ordered the lieutenant to the grinning pilot. "And burn the air getting him there."

IT WAS a completely sobered O'Leary who entered operations and snapped to attention in front of the division commander. His keen blue eyes had lost their usual twinkle and his strong jaws were set. A Black Wing had apprised him of the mysterious destruction.

As the general explained what was required of him and his men a grave expression stole over O'Leary's face.

"Don't tell me that you believe in the supernatural, O'Leary," said the general, when finished.

"Ghosts is ghosts, sir." The Irishman stirred uneasily. "But I'll do me bist, sir."

"Don't let it get you down. Good luck. The others have received their orders."

The general shook hands. O'Leary saluted and left.

Rolled out on the deadline were two bombers and a single-seater, ghostly shadows in the night. On each side of the fuselage of the single-seater, a Spad, was painted a winging hawk, carrying in its screaming beak an effigy of the Kaiser in diapers. Groups of Black Wings silently watched the doomed pilots inspect their ships.

The Sky Hawk came to the deadline and minutely examined his Spad. Finished, he went to one of the De Haviland bombers.

"We ain't dead yit, Jim," he said to Flight Commander Halstead, its pilot. "The crazy Black Roc an' his Death Rocs is diggin' our graves, but that doesn't mean we're gonna be buried in 'em."

"Hell no, Terence!" Halstead fitted a bomb into its rack.

"And that goes for me," avowed Gally Grantland, Halstead's flying partner. His voice shook slightly.

All three grinned, though they were firmly convinced that this was their last time together. There was no battling the unknown. More than once they had ridden the sky in open defiance of Death, but this mission was different. Heretofore they had winged against humans, not against ghosts of the air that were invisible and noiseless.

Captain Wilkey came to the deadline and called the death detail about him.

"Boys," he husked, "they are asking you to perform a miracle. Try your damdest to blot out that mystery shed. A lot depends on you. Don't allow any superstitious fear to hold you back."

"I was told the clock in operations stopped," said O'Leary. "Like it done the night Reade an' the byes—"

"No such thing," lied the squadron commander. "Forget it! Happy landing, boys."

Amid grim well-wishes from the Black Wings gathered around the flyers went to their ships.

"Look here, Jim an' Gally," said O'Leary to Halstead and Grantland, "me an' you guys is pals. I'll not for-

git it tonight, in face o' all the ghosts in the war."

"Listen, you big Irish mug." Halstead gripped the Irishman's paw. "Everyone for himself, and the devil for all."

The DeHavilands took off first, then O'Leary followed in his single-seater Spad, also equipped with bombs.

Higher and higher he climbed until the heavier and slower ships were far below him, their noses pointed into the north. Due to the blackness the two bombers were flying "blind." Even so, from long experience, they knew each inch of the territory they were to cover.

CHAPTER III

THE DEATH ROCS OF HODUR

THROUGH the blackness towards Commercy winged the doomed ships. The two bombers still flew "blind," but not the Sky Hawk. The squadron really had guessed the secret he so carefully had kept since joining the air force. High above his comrades, his keen "night eyes" swept the skies.

An unnerving dread had him in its grip. When would the Death Rocs of Hodur strike? He was really afraid. It was not a pleasant feeling.

Apprehensively, for the dozenth time, he glanced at the clock on his instrument board. A few minutes of three. And at three the mad scientist had threatened to destroy the Americans' largest ammo dump. Cat-eyes roving about, O'Leary stuck to his course, the dread within him growing stronger and more unnerving with the passing minutes.

He threw a piercing look downward and ahead. The two De Havilands were still eating up the miles. Commercy was not far away. From there he must follow the highway for eleven kilometers then branch off into the northwest for Germany. And once in the realm of the mad "Emperor of the Skies," what then?

Out of the blackness on his left loomed a queer, ugly shadow of monstrous proportions. In a flash it was gone, speeding south. Ice streaked down the Irishman's back.

Despite his superstitious fear the Sky Hawk whipped about and gave chase to the phantasmal spectre. Only a fleeting glimpse he had caught, but that glimpse had made his blood run thin. To him the spectre had appeared a thing of the night, colossal and bat-like, something supernatural, unguided by human hands. A mighty, but silent, cruiser of the air. But where was the ghoulish monster now? Mysteriously it had vanished. But how had it vanished? It had seemed larger than the largest Gotha.

Skin prickling, back and forth O'Leary flew, diving, zooming and circling, but no vestige of the gigantic phantom crossed his vision. He swung around and raced to catch up with the bombers. Had the awful thing destroyed them? Nervously he glanced at the clock again. A minute of three. He opened the throttle wide and climbed slightly. Another nervous look at the time. Exactly three o'clock.

Above the roar of exhaust and propeller a heavy detonation echoed and re-echoed. Heart pounding, O'Leary glanced fearfully over a shoulder. In the distance behind him the sky was splashing red.

"The saints save me! The ammo dump at Fleurs. Hell's angels is on the war path."

Rolled and reverberated two more mighty explosions. Crimson knives stabbed the heavens far to his rear over Fleurs. Resolutely he kept on.

Nearing the highway stretching north from Commercy he flew low enough for his cat-eyes to plainly distinguish objects. The road was glutted with troops, artillery, munitions and supplies.

Although his exhaust drowned all other sounds, he could imagine the bedlam of rumblings, clankings, clatterings, the crunch of wheels, throaty

orders, horses snorting and the occasional cracks of black-snake whips rising up to him.

It was the Allies' answer to the challenge of Montsec, that impregnable German butte which so successfully had resisted all attempts at capture. Drenched in the blood of countless Frenchmen, far in the northeast towered the Kaiser's fortress, arrogantly confident and derisive in its powerful strength.

Fascinated by the spectacle below him, the Sky Hawk watched. Snaked along by clanking tractors, eight-inch howitzers were sandwiched between straining horse batteries of 75's and 4.7's. Infantry, resolute and grim, plugged steadily northward. Close behind followed a ponderous 155-mm G.F.P., (Grand Puissance Filoux) long-barreled French cannon mounted on its lumbering auto truck. More infantry. A three-inch anti-aircraft outfit. A machine gun company, a monstrous British nine-point-two, juggernaut of destruction, weighing 29,100 pounds, then a 240-mm French howitzer drawn by its ten-ton tractor. Seemingly the big parade had no beginning, nor ending.

NERVES tense, O'Leary zoomed and flew along the highway, his gaze searching the blackness. Anxiously he checked the clock on his instrument board. Ten minutes after three. The time set by the German madman. Once more a shudder of apprehension chilled him. Fiercely he shook his head to cast off the ghostly spell.

Then another of those somber gigantic shadows rushed by his Spad. O'Leary's skin prickled. On the highway blossomed a hellish red blast, then a rush of air that tossed the Spad about like a ship in a whirlpool.

"Mother o' Mary!" gasped O'Leary. "An' not a ship in the sky."

Through a haze of swirling smoke he saw that the 240-mm French howitzer had toppled into the ditch. On its side lay the ten-ton tractor. Grotesque, huddled humps were scattered all about it.

Farther along, from the midst of an infantry company, shot up a hellish inferno, hurtling high mangled bodies. Hell itself had upended and was dumping its fire and brimstone on the Commercy highway.

"Awful," groaned the horrified O'Leary. "Awful."

Another staggering red blast blotted out a French machine gun company in a bloody shambles. Gutted of its entrails, a mule kicked out its life in the dust. Wounded unto death, here and there poilus in their long, cumbersome overcoats of 1870 style tried desperately to crawl into the ditch for cover.

Like a madman O'Leary flew about endeavoring to discover the source of the awful destruction raining from the heavens on the defenseless troops. Nothing but empty space, black and sepulchral, rewarded his efforts.

Down swooped another of those invisible, annihilating angels. With deadly aim it struck a seventy-five battery. A gun carriage, wheels wrecked, rolled into the ditch. Terror-maddened horses, tangled in harness and chains, plunged and reared. Arms shielding heads, drivers and cannoneers ran wildly in all directions to escape the descending wrath.

Searchlights then came into action and futilely criss-crossed in the air. Pounded and hammered anti-aircraft guns, just as futilely. From all points of the compass pursuit planes raced to the rescue. Like bats hunting insects, they flitted, dived, darted, tumbled and circled. Except for themselves and O'Leary, the air was empty. Magically the destroyers had vanished.

Nerves ragged, but resolved to fight to the last, O'Leary zoomed, whirled on a wing-tip and sped after his comrades. Even though whole France were ripping asunder, it must not interfere with his mission. He and the bombers had been ordered to strike

at the heart of the destroying menace, and strike they would even though they were compelled to dive into the bowels of hell.

Cold sweat beading his forehead and his hands trembling on the controls he finally caught up with the De Havilands and took the sky position.

While racing along a salient jutting into German territory, he espied a plane flying low and dashing across his flight. Could it be one of the phantom destroyers winging back to Germany? No, came his ready answer, for this ship was of normal size and was visible. Doubtless a Yankee pursuit searching for the wreckers of the highway.

Down he shot to identify it. Maltese crosses! An Austrian two-seater! What was it doing so far from home? Still, it presented a chance to repay in small part the debt he owed his mangled comrades back there on the death-ridden road.

Fire belching up at O'Leary's Spad from Spandaus in the rear pit, the Austrian dived to escape. Cleverly evading the steel storm, the Sky Hawk followed him down. At a hundred yards he tripped his Vickers, his death-blast ripping into the Austrian's tail.

"Kraut thirty-three!" O'Leary snapped it out in grim satisfaction. "Into hell with the other black fiends."

Crippled, the Austrian two-seater spun to earth. Near the ground it managed to jerk out and pancake, cracking up on its back.

The Sky Hawk swooped over the wreck, zoomed and continued after his comrades.

CHAPTER IV

HELL IN THE SKIES

DAWN was beginning to streak the east when the three American ships winged over no man's land and into German territory. Visibility was still low. But it was a different O'Leary that now barged through the skies high above his comrades, his keen eyes alert for lurking enemies. With the approach of day his fears of the supernatural had vanished. Ghosts flew only at night. Once again he was himself and not afraid of the devil.

It was with a measure of anxiety, however, that he noted heavy cloud banks stretched in the direction of the Black Circus aerodrome and hanging at an altitude decidedly unfavorable for the bombers. Down he dived.

So close to Halstead did he come that he almost grazed a wing-tip of the De Haviland. They talked in a sign language it had taken them a long while to perfect. Grantland, in the monkey-seat, watched.

"Objective straight ahead," signaled O'Leary. "On account of clouds bombers fly low."

"What will you do?" asked Halstead.

"Stay aloft and jump any black patrol menacing you," came the quick reply.

Vigorously Halstead protested, sensing that O'Leary intended sacrificing himself in order that the bombers should have a better chance of reaching their objective. O'Leary's answer was characteristic of him. He tendered his pal a signal understood in all armies. He thumbed his nose.

Up he climbed until he nearly reached the Spad's ceiling above the upper strata of the clouds, then flew steadily by compass, his eyes sweeping in all directions. A glance at the clock. In short order, if his instruments and map didn't lie, he and the bombers should be directly over the mad scientists aerodrome.

Of a sudden he focussed his gaze ahead and downward. Twelve enemy ships skimming the top surface of a cloud layer. A full dozen of the Black Circus stalking Halstead's bombers below.

O'Leary's teeth clicked in resolve. Jumped by the patrol, the unsuspect-

ing bombers wouldn't have a ghost of a chance. But if he could surprise the patrol by dropping out of his misty screen, the bombers would be warned and in the resultant confusion the clever and daring Halstead might reach his objective.

Fully O'Leary realized the tremendous odds pitted against him, a lone airman attacking twelve expert fliers of the notorious Black Circus, but he also remembered the ghastly scene of blood and destruction the Commercy highway had presented. And that shambles must not be repeated. His life to afford Halstead a better chance to blot out the destroying Death Rocs of Hodur. It was a worthwhile gamble.

Hidden by the clouds, he opened throttle wide and raced for position.

Now! A bolt of lightning, brace wires screaming, downward through the clouds he plunged. His was a complete surprise, for the Black Circus leader was casually signaling for a change of direction.

Down! Down! Four hundred yards! Three! Two! He must make certain of his kill. One hundred! Fifty yards! The Fokker was squarely in his sights. He tripped triggers.

KILLED by the blasts, the German leader never knew what had hit him. Zooming, the Sky Hawk banked vertically into a sharp turn to present as difficult a target as possible to the rest of the bewildered patrol. Infinitely fast as had been his maneuver, he had glimpsed the leader's Fokker in flames and crashing to earth.

"Number thirty-four!" he cried. "Leg it, Halstead, leg it."

But he must strike again before the patrol recovered from its confusion, and at the nearest Fokker. The one whipping about.

Forward went his stick. Wind shrieked. Like stinging whiplashes, from two dashing Fokkers Spandaus spewed their steel couriers of destruction at him. A brace wire of the Spad parted with a wicked twang! Unexpectedly a Fokker crossed in O'Leary's sights. Only for a split-second though, but a split-second to an expert machine gunner like the Sky Hawk was ample time. Tracers vomited from his Vickers. Up he zoomed, fusillades of bullets cracking in his wake. His instrument board splintered and torn fabric ripped from a wing.

He glanced groundward. Its pilot hanging limply over a side of the cockpit, the Fokker was doomed.

"Number thirty-five!" He caught a glimpse of Halstead's bombers racing for the shed. "Atta bye, Jim! Show yer tail."

But there was little time for exulting. Death roared all about him. On his upward zoom he had banked in a swift turn. Bullets were thicker than hailstones. At the top he half-looped and whipped out. Doubtless the Germans, frantically maneuvering to bring him down, now expected him to turn tail for home. But not the Sky Hawk. The De Havilands must be given their chance to drop their bombs. Also, the unexpected was O'Leary's ace in the hole. Many times it had won for him.

A firm believer that offense is the best defense, he picked another Fokker and dived. Directly in front of him flashed an enemy ship. Although it looked like an unavoidable collision which would send him and the German hurtling to destruction, he cut loose his guns. A rasping, demoralizing side-swipe and his Spad wobbled drunkenly. By a hair's-breadth he had escaped death. But not the German pilot. The Sky Hawk's machine guns had almost torn off his head.

"Number thirty-six!"

But the Fokker O'Leary originally had picked for a victim had vanished. Still, there were hundreds of others, it seemed. Everywhere he glanced, as he zoomed, he saw twisting, turning, diving black crosses, flame spit-

ting from Spandaus. Indeed he was in a nest of giant hornets; giant hornets desperately endeavoring to sting him to death.

Across a weather-tanned cheek streaked a hot iron. Chattering Spandaus. His oil gauge shattered. Whipped a roaring shadow above him. A glance behind. Aiming at his tail, rushed another Fokker.

On vertical axis he executed a hairpin turn and shot down. Ear-splitting blasts. Something dripped from his chin. Blood! Another ship crossing his path. Up he zoomed and into an Immelman turn. He was on the tail of a Fokker. His guns hammered.

There was no noting the result, because he had spun around on a wingtip. Under the strain his Spad shuddered violently. Four more Fokkers. A splintering crash. In an effort to evade the Sky Hawk's mad aerobatics two Germans had met head on. He could take no official credit for them. Rolling out, he climbed.

His Spad suddenly was wrapped in a clammy, white blanket. Spandau bullets tore through fabric, but no enemy planes were visible.

"Cloud bank." O'Leary spat out blood running into the corners of his mouth. "A chance to git me breath."

REVERBERATED four heavy detonations right under him. The Irishman thrilled with triumph. He had given his pals their chance, and they had come through, nobly. Both ships had dropped their bombs.

"Good old Jim! Ye didn't disapp'int me."

His joy was short-lived, though. Tearing north in his milky shroud, through a tiny rift he momentarily glimpsed the mammoth sheet-iron shed. It was intact. The bombs had missed. From four large holes in the ground smoke floated lazily upward.

"It's up to me," he said through closed teeth. "I gotta win!"

He jockeyed for position, keeping in his cloudy screen. Except for occasional rifts which afforded him fleeting glances of the floor below he flew blindly.

There it was! That long, rectangular sheet-iron shed stretching east and west, due north of the aerodrome. And under its roof skulked the Death Rocs of Hodur, hiding until night came again; ghosts afraid of the day. Surrounding the shed were line upon line of sentries with glistening bayonets.

On guard, a Fokker patrol circled above the building. Trying to bomb it would be rank suicide, but what was the life of an airman if thousands of lives could be saved?

He gained position. Distance and timing judged to a nicety, down he screamed through the cloud rift and into the swarming Fokkers. Eye along bomb sights, he was about to level off and release his two bombs when a diving Fokker cut suddenly across his path and threw him off his aim. Groundward streaked two silver threads from under the fuselage of the Spad. Rushed skyward terrific twin blasts of flame and twisting smoke.

While zooming for the protecting clouds, O'Leary glanced backward to note the result of his shots. He gritted his teeth in bitter disappointment.

Although pandemonium reigned about the sheet-iron shed and in the aerodrome, he had missed his target. Black Circus fliers were running to their ships and scrambling into pits. Sirens screamed insanely and anti-aircraft crews swung their guns back and forth, vainly searching for the daring Amerikaner Sky Hawk.

"I missed, I missed," groaned O'Leary tragically. "The saints hilp our division now."

Anti-aircraft shells burst perilously close to him as he winged south through the covering clouds. No end, it seemed, to the misty screen enveloping him. A rift beneath him. He

caught his breath. The ship of Wright and Peterson, aflame, was spinning to earth. Guns blazing, a Fokker mercilessly followed it down. O'Leary's eyes misted.

"Goodbye, fellers," he murmured. "A glorious ind."

Straight south he flew, anti-aircraft shells, fired blindly, exploding in the clouds. Spandau slugs from the Fokkers waiting to sight him occasionally clipped a wing. Then another rift. He froze in horror.

ON the floor was Halstead's cracked up ship, tail high and wings crumpled. A ring of Germans surrounded it.

"Good old pals," choked the Irishman. "Ye died like only Black Wings kin."

Then the Sky Hawk saw red. Although leaving his protecting cover undoubtedly would cost him his life, he had resolved to fire a farewell salute over his pals' mangled and broken bodies; a salute the Black Circus would long remember.

He dipped wings of his bullet-riddled Spad and streaked down. Both guns pounding, he let the group of Germans have it full force. They melted under the steel hail like candles in a blast furnace.

Up the Sky Hawk shot. Everywhere the clouded sky was crowded with Fokkers. And still more were taking off from the Black Circus tarmac below.

"Climb, Lulu Belle, climb," he pleaded to his faithful Spad. "Grab hold o' the moon an' pull, baby."

Out of space screamed down a Fokker. The Sky Hawk half-looped into a turn. Over eager to shoot down the famous Amerikaner ace the German tripped his Spandaus too soon and paid the penalty, as had many other over eager Germans before him. Riddled by tracers, he crashed.

"Number thirty-seven!"

Then the Fokkers ganged O'Leary en masse. Under the control of his marvelously light hands the Spad became a thing possessed, a whirling Dervish of the air, but all the while clawing for altitude.

By sheer nerve alone the Sky Hawk fought his way skyward through the myraid of black war birds trying to prevent him from reaching the clouds. Nose on came a Fokker. A scathing blast of flame-tipped steel riddled the foolhardy German.

"Number thirty-eight!"

Valiantly the wounded Spad stretched up nose for the misty haven just above.

"A little more, Sister Susie," coaxed O'Leary. "Jist a little more."

As though the laboring ship understood, the clouds seemed to rush downward and the Sky Hawk found himself again enveloped in the milky shroud, a shroud which cut him off from the rest of the world. Through the ghostly haze, churned into a whirlpool of milk by the propeller, O'Leary fixed eyes on a wounded wing. It wouldn't stay with the ship much longer. Also sections of fabric were ripping off.

Soon, he judged by time and speed that he must be close to the end of the cloudy stretch. Then it would be the Fokker's turn. He had had his.

In front of the ghostly whirlpool caused by the propeller the mist rapidly grew thinner and brighter. Then, a brilliant incandescence hit O'Leary. He had left the clouds and now was flying straight into the sun. He knew he hadn't long to live.

But he had not seen the large formation of American airmen winging to his rescue. The Germans had, however, and were hectically climbing for altitude. Then the Sky Hawk spied the onrushing Americans.

"Sky Riders!" he jerked out. "Thanks, fellers. Too late, though. Wing won't hold."

Shreds of fabric ripping off and swishing past him and the injured wing see-sawing dangerously, he urged his crippled Spad along, German archies blazing away at him.

CHAPTER V

A DESPERATE GAMBLE

BLACK despair gripped the American sector. Fear gnawed at formerly stout hearts. The havoc wrought by the mysterious infernal machines of the mad scientist had done its work. Through those inexplicable grapevine channels ever present in all armies, had spread like wildfire a terrifying rumor that, from the blanket of night, invisible and noiseless, mammoth and invincible, the Death Rocs of Hodur had wiped out Paris, had blasted ammunition dumps, had effaced highways and had slaughtered whole brigades. Where would it end? The war was lost.

Never had American morale fallen so low. Everywhere one met solemn-faced officers and men suffering from a mental condition that verged on panic. No outfit was safe from the juggernauts lurking in the skies to smash and destroy.

Nor were the war-hardened and daring, but overly superstitious, fliers of the 411th Pursuit an exception. In addition to the general dread, grief weighed heavily.

Night had descended and not one of the bombing flight had returned. This in itself pointed to failure of the mission. Still, one slight hope was left. Had the mysterious shed been destroyed before the bombers had been brought down?

The Black Wings sat at table in their messroom waiting for supper, long delayed. Supper? They had lost all appetite for food.

A sergeant hurried in to Captain Wilkey. Eager eyes questioned him. He nodded reassuringly. More than one heart skipped a beat. Delivering his message, he went out. Captain Wilkey's tired eyes lighted.

"This morning," he anounced, "a patrol of Sky Riders reported sighting O'Leary's Spad, a wing hanging by a toehold, emerging from the clouds and chased by Black Circus Fokkers. This was deep in German territory, though, and with little chance of his making our lines. The Sky Riders then engaged in a dog fight and lost sight of him."

Hope blazed fiercely. Had the indomitable Irishman accomplished the impossible? It seemed so, for the Sky Hawk was not the one to turn tail until he had gained his objective, no matter how insurmountable the odds.

Their optimism was rudely dashed. Window panes shattered simultaneously with a blinding glare. The building rocked. The Black Wings momentarily froze into statues. Again the Death Rocs had struck. There ensued a mad rush for the doors.

Faces blanched, the fliers cursed and fought like madmen to get outside. A yawning, smoking crater in the middle of the tarmac met their frightened gazes. Staggering through the swirling smoke, blood streaming down his face from an ugly wound, came Sam, the chief mechanic, a message bag clutched to his breast.

A sharp command from Captain Wilkey restored a semblance of discipline and order.

"Inside! All of you," he rasped. "You're a lot of frightened school kids."

Shamefacedly the Black Wings returned to the messroom. The chief mechanic, holding to a chair for support, handed the message bag to the squadron commander.

"Sir," he reported, "Ned Somers and I were walking past Number three hangar. Everything was quiet and still. Suddenly this bag dropped from the sky, then hell busted open. We didn't see or hear a damn thing. Ned was killed and something hit me and knocked me down."

"All right, Sam," Grimly Captain Wilkey opened the bag. "Give him first-aid, Birch."

In rigid tenseness the Black Wings waited for the captain to read the message.

Cursing to himself, the squadron commander read aloud:

To Captain Claude H. Wilkey,
Commanding the 411th Pursuit Squadron.
It seems that you doubt my power.
At dawn three of your ships attempted to bomb my aerodrome. They paid the penalty of their foolhardiness.
To convince you there is no battling the supernatural, before the week is ended your squadron shall be effaced.
(Signed)) Count Joseph von Krassner,
The All Powerful,
Emperor of the Skies.

For a space heavy silence reigned in the room.

"Damn it!" exploded a nervous pilot. "I say for the squadron to take the air against this insane monster. That way, at least we can die trying. This sitting here helpless is wrecking my nerves." He smashed his drinking glass against a wall. "For God's sake!" he cried. "Can't we do something?"

"Birch is right," seconded another pilot. "They call us the Black Wings. Tough guys. And look at us. Sparrows afraid to venture into the rain. Gawdamighty! I can't endure this inaction much longer."

"Easy, men, easy," pleaded the worried captain. "I know how you feel. I should like nothing better than to personally lead you against this self-styled Emperor of the Skies, but the division commander says not."

"Damn the division commander! Damn everything!"

The telephone buzzed and a Black Wing answered it.

"For you, Captain," he growled.

The squadron commander paled as he listened. Finally he disconnected and turned to the anxious aviators.

"Major-General Burdick and several others were killed in the new division headquarters," he informed. "Killed by the Death Rocs of Hodur."

"I—I can't stand it—I can't stand it!" Birch collapsed, head on the table, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

An outside door banged open. Nerves at the breaking point, the Black Wings wheeled around. Uniform torn and his face scratched and dirty, the Sky Hawk barged in.

"O'Leary!" gulped the captain.

"Himsilf, an' in person, sir."

"Halstead, Grantland, and the others?"

"Dead, sir. Cracked up. All of 'em."

"And the sheet-iron shed?" breathlessly inquired a Black Wing.

"Untouched! Still standin'."

"How did you land? And where?"

"While staggerin' over a wood in our lines I picks me a nice big tree to light in, sir. Shure an' I been pullin' splinters out o' me fannie iver since."

"Get something to eat and then come to operations and write your report. There's hell to pay in the division."

When O'Leary reported, Captain Wilkey regarded him gravely.

"I told Richards, of the Intelligence, that you had returned," he informed. "He wants you to report to him immediately. Do you feel up to it?"

"With me pals dead, sir, an' the whole division shot to hell, feelin's don't inter into the matter. I'm ready."

"Thanks, O'Leary. We need men like you, and badly. It's in regard to the Death Rocs."

"Shure an' I ain't scared o' the damn things in the daytime, sir, but they sure makes me flesh crawl at night. I'll niver fergit that tirrible scene on the highway."

IN LESS than an hour O'Leary stood before Richards. Haggard and drawn from worry and loss of sleep, the Intelligence officer gripped the Irishman's hand. O'Leary related the result of the disastrous bombing flight.

"O'Leary," stated Richards, "victory, or utter rout, stares us in the face. These Death Rocs of Hodur are the deciding factor."

O'Leary puffed savagely on his unlighted cigarette, but made no reply.

"A message dropped near division headquarters at the time General Burdick was killed, threatens the annihilation of our entire division. And this before the end of the week."

"I reckon it ain't no fake threat, either."

"Indeed it isn't, O'Leary. Will you volunteer for another detail which is even a more desperate gamble than your last?"

"Why not? If we're all gonna kick the buckit, I jist as well make a splash."

"I knew I could rely on you. You are to join the circus of Count von Krassner as a pilot."

"Holy mackeril!"

"Only by steel nerve and astute cunning can you succeed. That madman is a fiend incarnate and will snuff you out like a candle if he gets wise to you. Even his own pilots fear him like the plague and obey his every order as though he were the Kaiser himself."

"I kin feel mud in me face already."

"Only by a lucky break it has been made possible. Did you ever hear of two renegade Irishmen in the air service of Austria named Thomas Walsh and Michael Gannon?"

"Who ain't, sir? Walsh is a pilot an' Gannon is his machine gunner. Shure an' they's got a stinkin' riputation fer cruelty an' lowdown tricks on the Eyetalian Front."

"Right after the bombing of the Commercy highway last night, on their way to report to Count von Krassner for espionage duty, they were shot down by an unknown American aviator. Walsh was called from Austria on account of his ability to see at night. They are our prisoners. Like most renegades they value their lives above everything. In exchange for those lives, they talked."

"Shure an' 'twas me what shot down the skunks."

"Fine. That is a favorable omen. Neither Walsh nor Gannon is personally known to Count von Krassner, but one of the Black Circus pilots, Heinrich Steuffel, was on duty with the renegades in Austria. You are to impersonate Walsh."

"What good will it do if Steuffel knows Walsh?"

"There lies the greatest danger. With Steuffel in the picture there is no hope, unless in some way you can silence, or outwit him."

"I git ye. Go on, sir."

"Walsh and Gannon, wearing American uniforms and flying an American ship, were to land in our lines at night, secure the exact ranges of all our division batteries from a spy, then fly back."

"Which sort o' fits in with the Black Roc's threat to distroy our division by the ind o' the week. With our artillery paralyzed we wouldn't have much chance ag'in a Kraut drive. Did Walsh betray this spy?"

"He claims he doesn't know who he is and that the information must come from Count von Krassner himself. Still, he might be lying."

"WHAT do ye want me to do, sir?"

"In some way, if possible, to blow up the shed housing the Death Rocs. A wild hope, to be true. If there is no way of accomplishing it, to carry on with the impersonation of Walsh and meet the spy in our lines. Apparently Count von Krassner depends for success on securing these battery ranges. I, with my men, will be in division headquarters now at Bourget prepared to substitute a chart of false ranges. It probably is the only method by which we can temporarily thwart the madman. Before returning to Count von Krassner bring the ranges to me. If you are unable to, destroy the chart and don't go back."

"Some job," replied O'Leary quietly. "But worth a try. Who's gonna pose as Gannon?"

"Pilot Peter Maher McGuffy, of the Sky Riders." Richards repressed a smile. "Like you, he can speak

German fluently. I already have talked with him."

"Creepin' cheeses! A war within a war."

Richards pressed a buzzer and an orderly ushered in the ace of the Sky Riders.

"Shure an' I'm honored to meet such a noble, intripid flier, *Mister* McGuffy," sarcastically greeted O'Leary. "I'm thinkin' I'll git the chance to learn ye how to fly a baby carriage with wings on it."

"After first teaching yourself, I presume."

Richards ordered Walsh and Gannon to be brought in.

On entering, the renegades casually saluted the Intelligence officer. They seemed in no way perturbed. O'Leary and McGuffy sized them up with interest. They were hard-looking customers, particularly Walsh.

"A couple o' fine harps ye are!" exploded O'Leary. "Fightin' fer the lousy Kaiser."

"To hell with the Kaiser." Walsh shrugged. "Gannon and I fight where the pay is highest. War is a business with us."

"Walsh," asked Richards, "you say that the Black Circus pilot, Heinrich Steuffel, knows you both?" Walsh inclined his head.

"Is he the only danger to the scheme?"

"Leaving out Count von Krassner, yes. Personally, I should hate to try to fool that baby. Nobody has yet. You have forged new descriptive lists and credentials, I presume." It was Richards' turn to nod. "Of course, there is always the added danger of a German intelligence agent who knows us butting into the picture."

"And you know nothing of these Death Rocs of Hodur?"

"The secret is known only to the Black Roc and a few of his trusted aides. But this much I do know. You are fools to try to fight them. The High Command already has issued a statement to the German army that an overwhelming victory can be expected very soon."

A long conference ensued, which was followed by another when the renegades had been escorted out.

"McGuffy," stated Richards in conclusion, "O'Leary will be in command."

"Hells bells! I could pick a better commander," snapped the crestfallen McGuffy.

Richards pretended he had not heard.

"In Austrian uniforms, you will take off tomorrow in Walsh's plane. It has been repaired. We are expecting great results."

"If Heinrich Steuffel don't kick over the buckit, sir," said O'Leary.

"Yes, if Heinrich Steuffel doesn't kick over the bucket," echoed McGuffy.

CHAPTER VI

THE EMPEROR OF THE SKIES

IN Austrian uniforms bedecked with decorations of the renegade Irishmen, O'Leary and McGuffy climbed aboard the Austrian two-seater. It was late in the afternoon. They adjusted to their head a speaking device invented and used by Walsh and Gannon. O'Leary turned to his flying partner.

"I'm warnin' ye," he said, acidly, "don't lead with yer right ag'in the Imperor o' the Skies. Shure an' it leaves ye wide open, which I proved to ye in Commercy."

"If you intend relying on that puny left jab of yours, we had better stay home."

Smiling faintly, Richards wrung their hands in farewell.

"The whole division is depending on you men," he choked. "Happy landing."

O'Leary warmed his motor, but before giving her the gun took a long look in the direction of Paris. Richards understood. The Sky Hawk was saying goodbye forever to La Belle France.

As they winged toward Germany, American anti-aircraft batteries blazed away, but purposely missed them. By dodging and varying speed and altitude, O'Leary lent reality to the farce.

Dusk was falling when they crossed into enemy territory. A patrol of the Black Circus dropped from the clouds and hemmed them in. O'Leary signaled to the patrol leader and kept on his course. Although the signal was readily answered, the Fokkers hovered above them and watched their every move. Count von Krassner's men were taking no chances.

As the two-seater winged deeper into Germany, O'Leary's practiced eye detected here and there betraying signs of a heavy concentration of foot troops and mobile artillery. At night he knew that the seemingly deserted area would blossom into scenes of hectic activity. The Germans were massing for the coming death-thrust at the American division.

Presently O'Leary pointed over the side to a cracked up ship south of the Black Circus aerodrome.

"Jim Halstead an' Gally Grantland," he said to McGuffy through the speaking device. "Over there, Peterson an' Wright. They died noble."

"Amen," breathed McGuffy.

"To the north, the big shed. Death Rocs o' Hodur."

On nearing the Black Circus aerodrome, both O'Leary and McGuffy lapsed into heavy silence. It was a nerve-destroying ordeal to enter the lair of the mad scientist, and demanded all their courage. Sweat beaded their foreheads under their helmets.

It was all O'Leary could do to throttle down. Due to his extreme nervousness his usual expert landing was a distinct failure. Hitting the tarmac with a decided bump, he taxied toward a group of Black Circus pilots awaiting him. Each pilot held a drawn Luger. It was a ticklish moment.

"I'll leave the motor idlin'," whispered O'Leary into his mouthpiece. "If Steuffel is in that gang o' skunks, be ready fer a quick git-away an' shoot straight an' fast."

THE Sky Hawk swung his ship around to a stop near the scowling sour-faced Germans. They were mean looking customers. The group opened up. Advanced a tall, gaunt man with slow, catlike tread. Dressed in black, a cape of the same color thrown back over his stooping shoulders, he stopped a few feet from the cockpit. On his sunken chest was embroidered a white skull and crossbones. From a pinched, cadaverous face, devoid of all hair, including eyebrows and eyelids, stared unblinking eyes, sure mark of the killer. His long nose was hooked like the beak of an eagle and his bloodless mouth was thin-lipped and cruel.

The Americans couldn't repress shudders. He seemed as though he had just arisen from a tomb; indeed a fit medium to deal with the supernatural.

His icy gaze pierced them through and through.

"I am the Count Joseph von Krassner, Black Roc," he announced in clipped, metallic tones, "the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies. Why did you land in my aerodrome, and who are you?"

O'Leary sucked in a breath before gaining courage to reply. McGuffy paled under his wind tan. The death-dealing madman sent cold chills down their spines.

"I am Hauptmann Thomas Walsh, Austrian air service," O'Leary managed to reply in German. "My observer is Leutnant Gannon. We were ordered by die Aufklarungstruppe to report to you, Excellenz."

Long and steadily those cold, fishy eyes transfixed them, ghoulish and unblinking. Inwardly the two Americans squirmed. It was even worse than they had anticipated.

"Do you bring credentials?" Count von Krassner removed his black skull cap with a bony, scrawny hand. He was completely bald.

"Ja, Excellenz." The Sky Hawk passed over his forged papers with trembling hand.

"Ah! you shake!" A hoarse, cackling laugh. "Soon all the world will shake and tremble and quake on bended knees before the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies."

Closely the mad scientist scrutinized the documents.

"They are in order." Another ghoulish scrutiny of the Americans and he waved imperiously to his men. They returned Lugers, saluted and stiffened to attention. "You are acceptable."

It was said in such chilling tones that the hearts of O'Leary and McGuffy turned to lead. Did he suspect their imposture? What a hopeless mission theirs, attempting to hoodwink such a master mind of evil.

"I thank you, Excellenz." Then O'Leary took the deciding plunge. "In Austria, Excellenz, I became acquainted with one of the Black Circus pilots, Leutnant Heinrich Steuffel. I bring him an urgent and confidential message from a dear friend."

McGUFFY'S hand stole to his automatic. The issue of Steuffel must be settled while they still were in their ship. If Steuffel were present, their only recourse was to start shooting and make a break for liberty.

"Leutnant Steuffel?" The Black Roc spat contemptuously. "I bother not with insignificant pawns. Deliver your message when he returns from patrol." He mouthed a blasphemous curse. "Steuffel! Steuffel! And a world to conquer. Out of your ship."

There was nothing to do but obey. On his feet touching the tarmac, O'Leary shivered. McGuffy's color was pasty. What kind of spell had the madman cast over them? Again that cackling laugh.

"Hauptmann Walsh, your quarters are that isolated stone house in the clearing." A bony finger pointed. "It is *verboten* for you and Leutnant Gannon to leave those quarters unless by my order, and then only under guard. The slightest disobedience of my orders means death, or worse. Ah-h-h! In my Black Chamber. Sentries guard the house. All entering, or leaving, without proper authority will be shot."

"Very well, Excellenz." With difficulty O'Leary kept his teeth from chattering.

His and McGuffy's nervousness seemed to afford the madman keen enjoyment, for he chuckled and chuckled.

"Gaze at that large shed surrounded by sentries," he rasped. "Gaze, and beware. I say—*beware!*"

"Yes, Excellenz," faltered O'Leary. "I am looking."

"And look well." The evil features contorted into a hideous leer. "No one but the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, and certain favored others, dare to approach it. My sentries fire first, then challenge. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Excellenz."

"Tonight you and Leutnant Gannon dine with me. Only once shall you have this great honor. Many have dined with me, and many have died. I wish to study your faces. In ten minutes a guard shall be sent for you." The Black Roc turned to the group still standing stiffly to attention. "Oberst Karl von Leipsic, conduct them to their quarters."

"Very well, Excellenz."

Replacing his black skull cap and drawing his cape about his emaciated body, Count von Krassner walked away. In column of twos the Black Circus pilots trailed in his wake.

Not a word did Oberst von Leipsic speak while escorting the Americans to their quarters. Reaching the door, he abruptly left. O'Leary and McGuffy entered the house and closed the door.

"Phew!" O'Leary mopped his damp forehead and whispered. "A livin' corpse! Careful that we ain't heard."

"Death himself." McGuffy sighed. "I feel like I was in a tomb.. And did you notice the solemn faces of the pilots? I bet they haven't smiled in months. God, what a depressing atmosphere!"

"Worse'n a morgue. I kin feel dead men starin' at me. If we ain't prisoners, thin what are we?"

"Targets for a firing-squad, with our shrouds all laid out."

"None o' that!" O'Leary's jaws snapped. "We gotta pull oursilves togither. An' listen. We're takin' our guns to supper. If it's one o' thim funeral-feasts, me an' ye ain't gonna be the only corpses presidin'."

"And we came here to blow up that shed. Isn't that a laugh?"

"Yeah. But I ain't laughin'. Did ye notice that all the inlisted men have won the Iron Cross? The Black Roc sure is picked himsilf the cream o' the army to guard thim Death Rocs."

An unteroffizier and two privates, all wearing the coveted decoration, came for them. On the way to Count von Krassner's quarters O'Leary tried to engage the corporal in conversation, but was silenced by the gloomy but respectful reply, "It is *verboten* to talk, Hauptmann Walsh."

The escort halted in front of a large, tomb-like concrete structure, painted a solid black. Pointing to a heavy steel door, also black, the unteroffizier silently indicated that the Americans were to enter.

On approaching the door it swung inward. No one had opened it. They stepped into a dark concrete passage and the door closed noiselessly behind them. Gingerly they pushed ahead in the blackness, to have another steel door silently open.

They found themselves in the private dining room of Count von Krassner. Except for an armed orderly, uniformed in black, standing stolidly to attention in each of the four corners, the large room was vacant.

O'Leary and McGuffy quickly took in their surroundings. A morgue was cheerful in comparison. The concrete walls and ceiling were bare and painted black. Four narrow windows, iron-barred, were hung with black velvet drapes. The floor, minus a carpet or rug, was black concrete. In the middle of the room, a massive table of black walnut, devoid of cloth and napkins, was spread for the evening meal. Eight stiff-backed chairs, four on a side, bespoke guests other than the Americans. At the head of the table was another black walnut chair, a grinning skull and cross-bones painted on it in white. Seven immense black wax tapers furnished the only illumination.

SOMEWHERE a gong boomed hollowly and the madman, garbed in severe black, entered through another door. Behind him trailed six armed Germans, also in black.

Oblivious to the presence of the Americans, the Black Roc seated himself at the head of the table. Each of the others stationed himself behind a chair. A chair on the right and the left of Count von Krassner was vacant.

Again that invisible gong boomed and the standing Germans took seats. Coldly the Black Roc motioned the Americans into the vacant chairs. Not a word did he utter.

Once more the gong boomed. In response a door opened noiselessly. Only by a supreme effort of will was O'Leary able to control himself at what he saw. The dead had answered the summons of the gong.

Carrying trays, Jim Halstead and Gally Grantland, their faces white and drawn, had entered and stood motionless, waiting an order to commence serving. It was a tense tableau.

Despite O'Leary's masterly control, those unblinking, fishy eyes of the

mad scientist must have detected some minute betrayal of emotion, for he demanded coldly:

"Hauptmann Walsh, is it so astounding that captured Amerikaner schwein should wait on the table of the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies?"

O'Leary mustered all his resources to make his voice sound casual.

"Not in the least, Excellenz. In Austria Leutnant Gannon and I often amused ourselves in like manner. I have a way with prisoners, Excellenz, which engendered no love for me in Italian hearts."

Before replying the Black Roc sharply scrutinized each of the Americans in turn. It was a trying ordeal for them.

Then came the dismaying answer.

"Hauptmann Walsh, credentials can be forged." Count von Krassner nodded to Oberst von Leipsic and the wax tapers were extinguished, throwing the room into blackness.

HANDS on Lugers, the Americans waited, pulses throbbing. "Ready, Excellenz," announced Oberst von Leipsic.

"Hauptmann Walsh," commanded the Black Roc, "read what Oberst von Leipsic holds up."

Relief surged over O'Leary. The test was easy.

"I am the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies," he read aloud. "The world shall cringe before me."

"Ach!" A cackling laugh. "Lights." The tapers were lighted. "Had you failed, Hauptmann Walsh." Again the terrifying laugh. "Ach! Had you failed. That is why I sent to Austria for you. The eyes of a lynx."

"Y-yes, Excellenz," O'Leary managed to stammer.

"I have heard of your tricks with prisoners," continued Count von Krassner. An ugly grimace twisted his cadaverous features. "These schwein, accompanied by the Amerikaner Sky Hawk, foolishly attempted to bomb my aerodrome. The schwein refuse to divulge the reason for that particular attack. But they will. My Black Chamber loosens all tongues. And silences all tongues, forever."

O'Leary flashed a look of admiration at the white, haggard faces of his pals. Despite the awful sentence hanging over them, they were bravely defying the madman. They preferred to die rather than to divulge the fact that the U. S. Intelligence knew that the sheet-iron shed contained the secret of the Death Rocs of Hodur.

"So, Hauptmann Walsh, you have a way with prisoners?" The Black Roc chuckled and chuckled. "And you dare to boast of your puny ability to the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies? That ability shall be tested, as were your lynx eyes. If, by midnight, you do not succeed you shall taste of my wrath."

The drone of throttled-down motors sounded outside.

"Ach! The patrol of Leutnant Steuffel returning. He is late, and shall be disciplined."

Icy chills shot through O'Leary and McGuffy. Disaster had finally struck. The appearance of Steuffel meant the immediate death of all concerned. But if they were to die, the mad scientist should die with them. O'Leary forced a reply.

"Now I can deliver my message, Excellenz."

"Verdammte! Leutnant Steuffel dare not intrude into my presence. Oberst von Leipsic, Leutnant Steuffel to report in an hour at Hauptmann Walsh's quarters."

Bowing stiffly, the colonel went to a telephone and gave the order. An hour longer to live, breathed O'Leary.

A wicked grin curled Count von Krassner's bloodless lips.

"The prisoners shall be sent to your quarters, Hauptmann Walsh. Till midnight. Till midnight to prove your boast."

The meal dragged to a close. When the last course had been finished, on sign from the Black Roc, his six aides

pushed back chairs and stood up, somber statues in black. Count von Krassner ordered O'Leary and McGuffy to arise, then dismissed the sentries. The hidden gong boomed. In answer, Halstead and Grantland came in, filled wine glasses and retired.

With shaky, bony hand the Black Roc raised his glass.

"The time draws near. Only forty-eight hours more. Then I, the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, shall crush the Amerikaner division. Shall stamp it out in rivers of blood. Blood! Blood! Rivers of Amerikaner blood. Commences then the march to world victory, my black death hurtling down from the heavens."

O'Leary and McGuffy downed their wine, but it was like drinking poison. Only forty-eight hours more and the bloody shambles of the Commercy highway would be duplicated throughout the American division. And that division was depending on them. And they helpless in the clutches of the mad war-scientist.

Apparently without being summoned, an unteroffizier entered. The Black Roc ordered him to take the two Americans back to their quarters. When they had left, the gong boomed again. Once more Halstead and Grantland filled their glasses and went out.

"Oberst von Leipsic," said Count von Krassner, "the sacred pledge."

The German colonel lifted his glass on high.

"We, the humble subjects of the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, do solemnly pledge ourselves, during life and even in death, to carry on with the commands of our august master."

Solemnly the six aides brought glasses to their lips and drank.

"Although the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, can never die," said the Black Roc, "it is his command, should he temporarily visit the realm of the dead, that you faithfully and truthfully execute all his orders as chronicled in the Book."

"Hoch! Hoch!" The six officers bowed heads and the mad scientist stalked from the room.

CHAPTER VII

BLACK ROC'S NEST

O'LEARY and McGuffy were escorted past the sentries to their stone house and were left alone. Tragically, they gazed at each other. What could they do? For O'Leary, though, there was one consolation. He at least could talk with his pals; say goodbye to them before all were put to death. Any idea of betraying the reason for the bombing raid was unthinkable.

"Halt!" rang a sentry's throaty challenge. "Who comes?"

"Corporal Zimmerhaeckel, escorting the Amerikaner prisoners to Hauptmann Walsh."

"Pass, Corporal Zimmerhaeckel and prisoners."

Sudden inspiration gripped O'Leary. There might be a way to save his pals and send back the time of the intended German thrust. On sound of a knock he opened the front door. Halstead and Grantland were pushed roughly in. The unteroffizier snapped to attention.

"Thank you, corporal. I shall notify you when to come for them." O'Leary locked the door and wheeled on the prisoners.

All remained silent until the footfalls of the unteroffizier had died out.

"Ye dirty, double-crossin' bums," whispered O'Leary. "Me an' McGuffy thinkin' ye dead, an' thin ye disapp'int us. Talk low."

"I near swallowed my Adam's apple when I saw your two ugly mugs decorating the festive board," said Halstead.

"I swallowed mine," declared Grantland, nervously.

"Jim an' Gally," stated O'Leary, "ye've gotta return to our lines. In forty-eight hours hell's gonna cut

loose, the Death Rocs o' Hodur blastin' the way fer a big drive agin the division."

"Shall we start now?" challenged Halstead, acidly.

"I'll tell ye whin to start. I got a scheme."

In guarded whispers O'Leary outlined the plan that had popped into his head.

"What do you think we are, Terence?" protested Halstead. "Yellow rats? Leaving you and McGuffy to face the music."

"Ye jist gotta, Jim. Tell Richards me an' McGuffy ain't got a chance to evin git near that lousy shed, but if things break right we'll carry on as Walsh an' Gannon. If ye blokes make it, have Richards drop a message in the Kraut lines addressed to the Black Roc; a message puttin' us right with the murderin' skunk. Richards is smart enough to understand."

"Halt!" Again a sentry's sharp challenge split the night. "Who comes?"

"Leutnant Steuffel."

"Pass, Leutnant Steuffel."

"On yer toes," whispered O'Leary. "Ye know what to do."

McGUFFY admitted the caller and locked the door behind him. O'Leary jammed his Luger into the German's stomach.

"What does this mean?" cried Steuffel, in alarm. "I came to see Hauptmann Walsh."

"I am Hauptmann Walsh," declared O'Leary in German. "Keep your voice down."

"But—but you are not Hauptmann Walsh," faltered Steuffel switching to English. "You are an Amerikaner spion."

"Right ye be, boloney! Want to save yer life?"

"Yes."

"Don't blame ye! Kin ye git these two prisoners past the sintries to me two-seater on the tarmac? That is, with a couple o' automatics ticklin' yer ribs?"

"No—no!" Steuffel's face blanched. "You do not know Count von Krassner—he would put me in his Black Chamber." The German shuddered violently. "God! Big husky men—I have seen them—come out of the Black Chamber—as living skeletons—sunken-eyed, cheeks hollow—stark fear in their eyes—and babbling like idiots. Come out to be shot—after their minds and bodies are wrecked by fiendish torture—torture that only the mad brain of Count von Krassner can devise."

The Americans paled. Halstead gripped O'Leary's arm.

"Terence," he pleaded, "you heard. Grantland and I can't condemn you fellows to such an awful thing. You and McGuffy go with Steuffel. We'll take his Luger and fight to a finish."

"I'm stayin'," announced O'Leary. "An ye, McGuffy?"

"I've already cast my vote."

"Atta bye! No more chin music out o' ye, Jim an' Gally." O'Leary addressed the shaking prisoner. "Snap out o' it, Hassenpfeffer! Kin ye git these two blokes past the sintries, if they takes ye with 'em in the two-seater? Americans don't murder their prisoners. Once in our lines ye'll be feriver safe from the Black Roc an' his torture chamber."

"Amerikaner lines?" wailed Steuffel. "Soon there will be no Amerikaner lines. No French lines. No English lines. France will be drenched with your blood—with Germany supreme. The High Command has so stated."

"Nuts on the High Command!" growled O'Leary. "I'm doin' a bit o' map-changin' mesilf. Will ye take 'em past the sintries, or not?"

"But you do not understand. The Death Rocs of Hodur will annihilate—"

"What are the Death Rocs o' Hodur?"

"Nobody knows. Nobody but Count von Krassner and the fiends working

with him. They are appalling—irresistible. And some say they are of the supernatural. What good would it do me to reach the Amerikaner lines? And this Black Chamber. Ghosts appear. Death-heads. It is awful."

"Thin I'll kill ye here."

"I'll do it—I'll do it."

O'Leary jammed his Luger into the quaking German's side.

"Where does the skunk keep his plans of the Death Rocs? There must be some papers, or somethin', that he works on."

"In his black, concrete quarters, if there are any plans. In his desk. But you can't get in. Nobody is allowed to enter his private office without direct orders from him."

"I got a habit o' disobeyin' orders. Whin challinged by the sintries, reply that ye're iscortin' Hauptmann Walsh an' Leutnant Gannon to the quarters o' Count von Krassner. Take his gun, Jim. All right, McGuffy, step up fer yer midicine."

Grinning sourly McGuffy moved forward and thrust out his face.

"Don't miss," he said.

"Me lift jab niver misses."

O'Leary then jolted his flying partner so hard with his left that it knocked him down. Blood spurted from McGuffy's nose and smashed lips.

"Can't dint a cream puff, eh?"

McGuffy got up, deliberately measured the waiting O'Leary and cut loose with a right swing. Flush on an eye O'Leary stopped it, the force of the blow spinning him around like a top.

"Never lead with my right, huh?" McGuffy wiped his bloody face.

The frightened Steuffel, jaw dropped in amazement, stared stupidly. What manner of ruffians were these Amerikaner fliers, brutally smashing each other and joking about it?

"Do yer stuff," ordered O'Leary to Halstead and Grantland.

Color gone and lips tightened, Jim and Gally silently gripped their rescuers' hands in goodbye. Neither could speak. They then bound and gagged O'Leary and McGuffy with strips torn from the bedsheets. Lugers covering Steuffel, they went out into the night.

Anxiously the two helpless men on the floor strained ears for the sentry's challenge.

"Halt!" It echoed and echoed. "Who comes?"

"Leutnant Steuffel, escorting Hauptmann Walsh and Leutnant Gannon to the quarters of Count von Krassner."

"Pass Hauptmann Walsh and officers."

O'Leary thrilled. So far, his daring plan had succeeded. Should his pals get free, at least the Americans would be warned of the impending disaster.

SUDDEN pistol shots blasted his hopes. The ruse had been discovered. Halstead and Grantland were staging their last fight. In the midst of the shooting he heard the roar of an exhaust and a ship take off. Hope surged over him again.

There followed a confusion of shouted orders. Motors droned. Screams of diving Fokkers. Shrieking sirens. Anti-aircraft shells started exploding. Searchlights swept back and forth past the windows.

The door banged open. Accompanied by Oberst von Leipsic, the officer of the guard trailing anxiously behind, the Black Roc entered. One look at his distorted face told the story.

"Untie them," he hissed.

Released, the Americans got up. McGuffy's lips were cut and bruised and his face was smeared with blood. O'Leary's left eye was angry and swollen.

"Well, Hauptmann Walsh?" The madman's voice was like an icy blast.

O'Leary was ready with his answer, futile as it might be.

"When Leutnant Steuffel called, Excellenz, I opened the door, but only to look into the muzzle of his Luger. Taken unawares, Leutnant Gannon and I were at his mercy. We fought, but Steuffel and the prisoners overcame us. They left with Steuffel. See how they manhandled us, Excellenz."

"Verdammte! The penalty for stupidity is death. But my Black Chamber first. Confine the schwein, Oberst von Leipsic."

Folding his long black cape about him, Count von Krassner left.

After being searched and relieved of their personal belongings, O'Leary and McGuffy found themselves in a dark, foul-smelling dungeon. Its dank, cold air made them shiver. The stone roof dripped water. Squeaking in fright, a rat scurried across the wet floor. High above them, level with the ground, was a narrow, single-barred window.

"Count von Krassner will teach you a lesson," sneered Oberst von Leipsic, their jailer. "Robust men have left the Black Chamber, yes, but as screaming maniacs. To further console you. At midnight the Death Rocs of Hodur will blast Commercy." Clanked shut the steel door.

"Anyway, McGuffy," observed O'Leary glumly, "we robbed the Black Roc's nist."

"Yes, we robbed the Black Roc's nest," groaned McGuffy, "but at what a cost. This is awful. Listen to those rats. We are buried alive."

"Don't lit it git ye, feller. Don't start thinkin'."

Huddled together for warmth, the cold and dampness having quickly penetrated to their marrows, they sat in a corner on the floor of the bare concrete room.

More than an hour must have dragged by when the steel door clanked open.

"The Amerikaner prisoners and Steuffel were brought down in flames," announced Oberst von Leipsic. "Soon, from other cells, your fellow prisoners will talk with you. And mayhap the dead will pay you a visit." Laughing, he closed the door.

"Poor Jim an' Gally," choked O'Leary. "God hilp our division now."

McGuffy remained silent. There was nothing he could say.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLACK CHAMBER

An unearthly shriek, long drawn out and quavering, echoed and re-echoed in the blackness of the underground hole. There followed the maniacal laugh of a madman, which slowly died out. This started the rats squeaking and scampering about. How long the nerve-racking ordeal lasted the Americans had no way of telling.

"Oh, I can't stand it," moaned McGuffy. "Before long I'll be the same way."

"Fight, old man, fight!" O'Leary shook his comrade. "Ye gonna let that mad fiend lick us? Shure an' ye're playin' right into his mitt."

"All right, O'Leary. I'll fight. Damn him!"

Faintly they heard a mouthing and a babbling, then that demoniacal, nerve-shattering laugh again. It proved too much for McGuffy. He cursed and cursed.

"Look! Look!" he cried in sudden terror. "That awful thing in the corner up there. Grinning at us."

O'Leary's skin crawled. In a circle of ghostly blue light, a hollow-eyed, toothless skull grinned down at him. The superstitious Irishman sat paralyzed. Nearer and nearer drew the death-head, then abruptly vanished.

"The merciful saints save us!" gulped O'Leary.

Bathed in nervous sweat and staring, wide-eyed, into the blackness of the corner, the fliers huddled closer together, their teeth chattering.

From somewhere there sounded a muffled sobbing, which became louder

and louder. It was enough to wreck the stoutest nerves, crouching in the darkness and listening to a man sob his heart out. O'Leary found voice.

"Peter Maher McGuffy," he said, "ghosts can't hurt a guy's body; they works agin his mind. That's why all the poor blokes in the Black Chamber is bughouse, 'cause they been seein' things."

"Yes, O'Leary."

"If we keeps on seein' 'em, we'll git goofy too."

"It's getting me now."

"Shure! An' me, too. But there's a way to lick the Black Skunk. It's his work, these death-heads an' things. We'll keep our eyes shut tight."

"I'll try to, O'Leary. But it'll be hell keeping our eyes shut, each instant expecting something awful to grab us."

"It'll be a damn sight worse watchin' 'em grab us."

Minutes dragged like centuries as they crouched in the wetness, lids sealed and hearts black with despair. Through the narrow, barred window, above the drone of motors in the sky, they heard a clock strike twelve. It was the hour the Death Rocs of Hodur were to be unleashed against Commercy. Ghosts again were to ride the skies.

"Listen," said McGuffy.

Sentries were calling out from their respective posts.

"Section Number Eight clear!" It reverberated throughout the aerodrome.

"Section Number Seven clear!" More distant.

And so on down the line boomed the voices to Section Number One. Then another report, much nearer.

"All clear, sir!"

A brief pause and another voice.

"Ready, Excellenz. All lights extinguished, sir."

They had arisen and were straining eyes upward through the barred window. Came a distant hail.

"Number Fourteen ready, Excellenz!"

Soon there sounded a muffled whirring and a gigantic shadow streaked past the window and was gone.

"Number Fifteen ready, Excellenz!"

Once more a muffled whirring and another mysterious shadow.

"Number Sixteen ready, Excellenz!"

This time O'Leary and McGuffy heard and saw nothing.

FOR a long time they watched and listened, but only the drone of hovering Fokkers guarding the mammoth shed, and the mad laughter and mouthings of the demented prisoners, rewarded their vigil.

The rest of the night proved a horrible nightmare. With the coming of day the window was screened, keeping the cell in darkness. Twice bread and water were thrust at them, but food and drink meant nothing to the Americans. Despite their brave battle, the dismal black surroundings and the raving of the prisoners were slowly but surely wrecking their spirit. Night came again.

Still huddled together, chilled and joints cramped and aching, they paid no heed when the cell door opened. Had the firing-squad come for them? If so, what did it matter?

"Outside," snarled Oberst von Leipsic.

An unteroffizier and a squad armed with rifles waited in the corridor. The prisoners were escorted up a flight of stone steps and out onto the tarmac. The night was black and moonless. All around them, in the distance, they heard the crunch of wheels and the sounds of marching troops. The Germans were massing for their victory drive.

Straight to the quarters of the Black Roc they were conducted and were ushered into the presence of the mad scientist. He chuckled and rubbed his bony hands together as he regarded them. Dully they stared back. Finally he spoke.

"My Black Chamber, is it not pleasant? Here, *schwein,* read this

aloud." He tossed a folded paper upon the table. "An hour ago it was dropped in our front line trenches."

Listlessly O'Leary opened the typewritten sheet. Just another of the madman's fiendish tricks. His eye mechanically traveled over the typed words, but they meant little to him. Just a jumble. Then his deadened brain commenced to function.

As he read aloud he had to grip the table to keep from falling.

To Count Joseph von Krassner,
The All Powerful,
Emperor of the Skies:

We thank you, Excellenz, for the use of Captain Walsh's plane. It handled nicely. Lieutenant Heinrich Steuffel, the American Intelligence agent who so ably engineered our escape, sits beside me as I write. The Black Wings eagerly are looking forward to meeting Captain Walsh and Lieutenant Gannon in the air. They are gullible fools and soon shall learn that this is not the Italian Front. Also, to their sorrow, they will find out what it means to fight against their own kind. Lieutenant Steuffel adds a postscript. James Halstead,
411th Pursuit Squadron,
The Black Wings.

P.S. Tell Hauptmann Walsh and Leutnant Gannon that it would have afforded me exquisite pleasure to have shot them, but the noise would have brought in the guard. Also inform the stupid pigs that my short acquaintance with them on the Austrian Front netted me valuable military information. Heinrich Steuffel,
U. S. Intelligence.

Silently O'Leary applauded the cleverness of Richards. His masterstroke had saved them from slow torture and death; saved them to carry on with their battle against the Death Rocs of Hodur. The mad scientist promptly confirmed O'Leary's joyful thoughts.

"Only that the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, requires the services of your lynx eyes, Hauptmann Walsh, he would have let you rot in his Black Chamber."

"Excellenz," replied O'Leary humbly," only by making every possible sacrifice can I atone for my stupidity."

"Silence! You will land here, Hauptmann Walsh." Count von Krassner made a pencil dot on a map of the American sector. "Jacob Richter, my agent, known to the Amerikaner *schwein* as Leutnant Arthur Wilson of the Field Artillery, will contact you immediately. The password is 'Montsec.' Leutnant Wilson will give you a range chart of all the batteries in the Amerikaner division. Return with it—instantly."

"Very well, Excellenz."

The madman got up and paced the room, talking and muttering to himself.

"You dare not fail me," he rasped.

O'Leary clicked heels and saluted.

"For the Vaterland, Excellenz. I shall not fail my Kaiser."

"Damn the Kaiser! A wooden puppet! It is the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, who sweeps all before him. The Emperor of the Skies, who shall live forever and ever."

THROWING an end of his black cape over a shoulder as though it were a Roman toga, the madman struck an imperious posture.

"With the exact ranges," he mouthed, "the division batteries will be effaced in one paralyzing stroke. Then, at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, following in the destructive wake of my Death Rocs of Hodur, the parade to victory starts."

He returned to the American map on the table.

"At midnight," he chuckled, "a bombing flight strikes at Commercy. This to draw the stupid Amerikaner airmen to that particular point so that your return with the chart will be unimpeded. Although you will fly an Amerikaner ship, the Emperor of the Skies takes no chances. The Amerikaner air force is panicky and in the blackness is liable to fire on any unescorted ship encountered. They now hunt only in formation. Ten Gothas and five formations of pursuit planes compose the bombing flight."

"Yes, Excellenz."

"In order that you, in your Ameri-

kaner ship, do not cross the flight, the route is this." With his pencil the madman drew a line on the map. "Equipped with speaking device, an Amerikaner two-seater awaits you on the tarmac. Wear the Amerikaner uniforms now ready in your quarters." He pressed a button and an unteroffizier appeared. "Escort Hauptmann Walsh and Leutnant Gannon to their quarters."

When alone in the stone house, O'Leary and McGuffy silently gripped hands. It was difficult for them to fully comprehend the miraculous change in their fortunes.

They donned the uniforms provided and anxiously awaited command of the Black Roc. Presently Oberst von Leipsic came and ordered them to their plane on the deadline. Count von Krassner already was there. O'Leary climbed into the cockpit and McGuffy into the monkey-seat.

"Return immediately," commanded the mad scientist. "No blundering, mind you, or more of the Black Chamber. And forget not that I, the Emperor of the Skies, shall endure for all time."

"Ja, Excellenz." O'Leary brought his hand to the salute. "For the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies."

On reaching three thousand feet and leveling off into the south, O'Leary filled his lungs to capacity.

"It shure is great to breathe God's free air agin," he said.

McGuffy didn't answer. He was silently offering up a prayer of gratitude for their deliverance.

CHAPTER IX

FATE SPINS A WEB

FLYING at ceiling, they passed over Montsec. From its dark, ominous shadow criss-crossed powerful beams of light, searching the skies and the enemy sector. Expertly O'Leary dodged the betraying lights. The mighty butte faded to the rear. O'Leary pointed over the side.

"Hooray!" he cried. "Marvoisin! American lines at last."

"I can't see a thing," laughed the delighted McGuffy. "I'm no cat!"

Presently O'Leary pointed down again.

"Xivray! Next town is Bouconville. A long stritch, thin over the Meuse to our landin' spot."

Far beneath them occasionally flared a heavy gun from its camouflaged mount as its steel monster sped toward Montsec. Seventy-fives and 4.7's ponged at short intervals, splitting the black blanket with tiny tongues of flame. Every now and then a searchlight found them, then, spotting the friendly insignia on fuselage and wings, went looking elsewhere.

After awhile O'Leary throttled down.

"I'm landin' in that old wheatfield near the wood," he announced. "The Kraut spy will be waitin' fer us."

Lightly the plane kissed ground and taxied to the wood. The Sky Hawk let his motor idle. Through the darkness cautiously a shadow approached the ship.

"The skunk is comin'," whispered O'Leary. "I kin see him."

"Did you make a forced landing?" inquired an American voice out of the black void. "I came to learn if you needed assistance."

"My fuel is low," replied O'Leary. "I had to risk a landin', or ilse crash. Reconnoiterin' over Montsec is a long pull."

"Montsec, did you say?"

"Yes, Montsec."

"I am Lieutenant Wilson of the field artillery." The spy came to the cockpit. "Your name, please?"

"Capt'in Thomas Walsh, American Air Service."

"Did you come for anything?"

"Whativer ye brung fer me."

"Here!" A chartcase was passed to O'Leary. "Naval guns at Rambucourt. Eight-inch howitzers west of Doncourt. 155-mm. G.P.F., French guns. 240-mm. howitzers north of

Commercy. Nine-point-two's near St. Agnant. In fact, all the batteries in the division. It will be a great day."

"Aye, a great day! Is there anythin' else?"

"Present my compliments to Count von Krassner and tell him I work hard and faithfully for him."

Swinging his ship around, O'Leary taxied away from the trees and took to the air. And in those trees he had left a death-web was being spun around him and his flying partner. A web which was to make useless all he and McGuffy had dared and suffered, and all they might dare and suffer.

"The brainless idiot!" muttered the German spy as he hurried to a large tree. "Come out, Hauptmann Walsh," he called in guarded tones. "The way is clear."

From the screening cover stepped Thomas Walsh, the renegade Irishman.

"Did the ass take the chart with him?" he asked.

"Yes. But without a doubt he will substitute one of false ranges before delivering it to Count von Krassner."

"When do I take off with the correct one?"

"As soon as I receive word that your plane is ready. Stay here in hiding until I return."

Jacob Richter, alias Lieutenant Arthur Wilson, chuckling to himself, disappeared into the shadows.

DESPITE the heavy gloom and in some instances despair written on the faces of officers and men, division headquarters at Bourget presented a scene of hectic activity. Telephones continuously buzzed under double shift. Motor cycles chugged up with messages, or else departed on similar errands. Runners and orderlies darted to and fro. Planes landed and took off and the wireless crackled.

Major-General Harris, newly appointed division commander, his countenance lined with worry, stood before a large wall map with several of his staff. At a desk sat Richards and two of his Intelligence agents snapping orders into telephones.

The American division, its back against the wall, was preparing for its last stand against the devastating Death Rocs of Hodur and the German drive. From the information brought back by Halstead and Grantlund, it was known within a few hours when the blow would fall.

General Harris crossed to the Intelligence officer.

"Richards," he said wearily, "we have done everything possible. The artillery has pledged itself to stick to its guns—well, until no guns are left. Our infantry will fight to the last ditch."

"Our barrage is to strike first?" inquired Richards.

"Yes. But a hopeless gesture, I fear. Our bombardment will continue until those damnable Death Rocs forever silence our guns. A bombardment, for weight and intensity, never before attempted. Is—is there any news of O'Leary?"

"Not a word, sir." Richards stirred uneasily. "And it is hopeless to expect any. Without a doubt he and McGuffy forfeited their lives for contriving Halstead's and Grantland's escape."

"But if the battery ranges are not taken back? Count von Krassner was relying on Walsh to—"

"No, General Harris. The Black Roc is not the one to rely on one agent for such a vital mission. With O'Leary exposed, it is reasonable to assume that the ranges have been transmitted to him long since."

A headquarters sergeant entered and came to the general.

"Sir," he informed, "there's a lieutenant outside demanding to see you, or Mr. Richards. I think he's crazy, or shell shocked. He cursed all my ancestors backwards because I wouldn't let him rush in, sir."

"Take him to the Personnel Officer. If he grows violent, let the guard

handle him. Nerve is broken, I guess."

"Very well, sir, but he said his name is O'Leary and that he'll blow up headquarters if—"

"O'Leary? God! Send him in. Run!

And in O'Leary barged, sore as a carbuncle over the delay. Officers and men stared at the Irish flier as though he were a saint descended from Heaven. Then the office resounded with husky cheers.

O'Leary tossed the chartcase to Richards.

"There they be, sir," he said. "Iv'ry battery in the division. The spy is Lootinint Arthur Wilson, field artillery. Work fast. The Imperor o' the Skies is waitin' fer Mrs. O'Leary's son, Terence, so he kin loose his lousy Death Rocs."

With hands that shook from eagerness Richards opened the chartcase. "If it includes all the batteries in the division, a substitute chart is already prepared," he said. "What a cure for sore eyes you are. Are we glad to see you!"

"I ain't ixactly weepin' over droppin' in. Now git this. At midnight tin Gothas an' five pursuit formations will bomb Commercy. It's a ruse to draw our ships there so I kin return unmolisted."

"Yes, yes, go on!" burst from General Harris. "When will the German drive start?"

"At eight in the mornin', sir. Death Rocs to hit first, tonight some time. If Mr. Richards will hurry a bit, sir, I'm thinkin' thim lousy Death Rocs won't hurt nothin' but a few grasshoppers."

The general sprang to a telephone.

"General Harris speaking!" he cried into the transmitter. "Zero hour for all batteries at four. Throw everything you've got, including the honey cart, and keep on throwing it. —Yes, yes! Damn it! *Four* o'clock! Blast them to hell. Keep pounding until the muzzles melt off." He hung up and mopped his sweating forehead. "You damned old grizzly bear!" he said to O'Leary. "Damned if I don't feel like kissing you."

"Jist a common Irish terrier, sir, what ain't quite kissable." O'Leary grinned happily.

A FEW minutes later Richards handed the Irishman the chartcase.

"O'Leary," he said, "you have saved the situation for us. I suppose that you realize it means your death to take back these falsified—"

"I been dead so many times in the last forty-eight hours, sir," interrupted the Irishman, "that one more death won't make much difference. If I don't come back, tell Jim Halstead to sind thim twinty francs he owes me to me nixt o' kin."

"You are brave, O'Leary." Richards slapped the Irishman on the back. "Good luck, Sky Hawk. I won't say goodbye." His voice clogged and he cleared his throat. "Oh, yes! Last night the Death Rocs bombed Commercy. The house in which Walsh and Gannon were confined was demolished. Gannon was killed. As yet Walsh's body has not been recovered, but we are digging for it."

"Sirves 'em right, the lousy traitors."

The general shook hands with the man willingly going to his death in order that the division might be saved. O'Leary saluted and hurried out. McGuffy, having attended to the refueling of the ship, anxiously awaited him.

Into the night they winged, unaware that their sacrifice mission was but a cruel joke of Fate.

His night-eyes piercing the blackness, O'Leary reached Apremont, then turned in a northeasterly direction to Loupmont. This in order to avoid any possibility of crossing the German bombing flight.

A few miles past Loupmont he sighted ships coming toward him.

"Shure an' the sky's filled with Yanks," he said to McGuffy. "We

gotta pass right through 'em. Too late now to go 'round."

"I can see nothing," complained his flying partner.

"What ilse kin ye ixpect of a McGuffy?"

Suddenly they were in the midst of the oncoming aircraft.

"Krauts!" burst from O'Leary in dismay. "The Black Roc's bombin' flight! They should be miles away. Jist like that crazy hyena to pull a bloomer like this. We're in a helluva jam."

Hardly had O'Leary spoken than McGuffy descried a monstrous shadow looming out of the night, in front and below him. It was the vanguard of the German armada. Like a battleship with wings, menacing and ugly, the mighty bomber raced toward them.

Then, from the ground, a searchlight of an American anti-aircraft battery streaked up and caught the two-seater squarely in its betraying beam. Recognizing the friendly insignia, the light switched to the Gotha. But the damage had been done.

"Damn that searchlight!" sounded in McGuffy's ear-phone. "It put 'em wise to us. We gotta fight our way through. The Gotha first."

SLAPPING over on a wing-tip, the Sky Hawk dropped nose. A shrilling of wires and down he dived, a lone hawk attacking a winged buffalo. In the deceiving darkness it appeared to McGuffy that O'Leary was plunging straight on to the Gotha. Involuntarily he shut his eyes, gripping gun-handles with all his strength as he waited for the crash. The terrific air pressure of the almost vertical dive nearly jerked him out of the pit.

With none too little room to spare, O'Leary streaked past the sky-giant and zoomed under its monstrous belly. His Vickers gushed tracers. Instinctively McGuffy tripped his guns.

Skyward O'Leary shot, glancing down. They had made their kill.

Lumbering crazily, the wounded Gotha burst into flames. The glare painted the sky red, silhouetting the next bomber, a grotesque, prehistoric monster winging through space.

Spinning madly, a colossal pin wheel of fire and oily black smoke, the stricken Gotha hurtled earthward. Then it pitched into a vertical dive, a gigantic comet lashing about in dying agony, a long, red tail streaming in its wake. A reverberating crash.

Taking advantage of the resultant blackness, O'Leary looked for a loophole through which to escape and wing back to Germany, but there was none. Other American searchlights went into action, criss-crossing the sky. An archie exploded so close to O'Leary's climbing ship that fragments whistled about his head. Then a searchlight enveloped his plane in a silver blaze.

The two-seater now presented an easy target for the German pursuit planes. A Fokker screamed down. Just another dim shadow to McGuffy, but plainly discernible to the cat-eye vision of his partner. Straight on the two-seater's tail roared the Fokker.

Two stunning Spandau blasts. Tracers slashed harmlessly past the American ship, but Death had knocked on its door.

O'Leary half-looped into an Immelmann turn. He now was behind and above the Fokker. Tac-tac-tac-tac, spat his Vickers. Another kill. Out of control the Fokker spun groundward, belching flame and smoke. A searchlight caught and followed the doomed ship down. Desperately the Sky Hawk climbed. Still no escape from the twisting, turning, diving wasps. Their tracer bullets latticed the blackness like a myriad of blazing arrows.

Spotting a Gotha blocking his path to freedom, O'Leary eased forward the stick. Again that unearthly screaming of wires. *Brammpp!* A piece of casing hit the engine cowl-

ing and glanced off. Full in O'Leary's face splashed a searchlight. Momentarily he lost direction. At his high speed, even a split-second was enough to spell destruction.

A wing-tip grazed the Gotha he had aimed for. His ship wobbled perilously. Back into control again. The Gotha's Spandaus pounded. *Twang!* A wire snapped and coiled like a whiplash, tearing fabric. Wood splintered from an outer-bay strut. Lurching giddily, the two-seater miraculously escaped.

Up among the war-mad Fokkers O'Leary climbed, then dived for the bomber once again. True to his mark he shot. Another searchlight. From the winged-cruiser vomited fire-tipped steel that pinged against his engine. Ricochets ripped through wings and whined into empty space.

Up under the belly of the Gotha screamed the Sky Hawk, his and McGuffy's guns spurting. Stabbed to the heart, the sky-elephant staggered, half-rolled, then skidded out of control. Splashing crimson, the monster fell to earth and crashed into a copse of trees, snapping off trunks like pipe stems.

O'Leary saw a chance to get free from the fight. Banking on a wing-tip, he lifted his ship about, dived, flattened out and, with throttle wide open, raced for Germany. In the blackness the Fokkers lost him.

Skimming over tree tops, he streaked north. When it was safe to do so, he climbed and settled down to straight flying. Not until he had winged across No Man's Land did he speak.

"Shure an' we're up ag'in it, McGuffy. Boat riddled an' wings like tattered shirts. A blind man would know we been in a fight. An' the Black Roc ain't ixactly blind. If any o' the bombin' flight returns an' reports us, what good will our fake ranges do?"

"We're sunk," agreed McGuffy, tragically. "What can we do?"

"I was thinkin' if perhaps we distroyed the ividence. Remimber the tree this side o' the Black Circus aerodrome. I'll slice off its top an' fake a crack up. Thin a match to the ship. Game?"

"Anything to make that insane demon use the false ranges."

Through the starless night sped the Sky Hawk. Presently his never-failing eye sighted the tree he sought. Under the fuselage ran a rending, rasping tear. The two-seater pitched and rolled. For an instant it righted, then hit ground. The prop splintered and the tail went over. A wing smashed.

Dazed and blinking, McGuffy crawled from the wreckage. O'Leary already had extricated himself. Blood trickling down his cut and bruised face, he stood surveying his handiwork.

"Now fer the fireworks!"

He struck a match and touched it to the fluttering fabric. Both ran. Up she blazed. Then the gas tank exploded with a mighty blare. The damning evidence no longer existed.

To the aerodrome they hurried, carefully avoiding the shadowy forms running to the scene of the crack up.

CHAPTER X

TRAPPED

RE-ENTERING the lair of the mad scientist taxed the Americans' courage to the limit. They had not forgotten his awful Black Chamber. Apparently the entire Black Circus guard was on watch for them, because no sooner were they challenged and recognized than the sentry bellowed out the intelligence. Instantly the call was taken up and passed along until it echoed and re-echoed.

An officer of the guard appeared, closely scrutinized O'Leary and McGuffy, then clicked heels and said:

"Follow me, Hauptmann Walsh. Please hurry, sir."

At the double he led them across

the tarmac toward the quarters of Count von Krassner.

They passed a two-seater rolled out on the deadline. It was equipped with four demolition bombs and was being serviced by a crew of mechanics. A plane of the latest German type, on its fuselage was painted a huge black roc a-wing, carrying a golden sceptre in its beak. No other than the ship of the Emperor of the Skies, concluded O'Leary.

Reaching the quarters, the officer saluted and bade them enter alone. The Black Roc sat at his long table, three of his aides on each side of him. The Americans snapped to attention in front of him.

"What happened to you?" demanded the madman impatiently. "That explosion?"

"My ship hit a tree in landing, Excellenz," explained O'Leary. "We cracked up, then the gas tank caught fire."

"Verdammte! More stupidity. The range chart, fool!"

O'Leary passed the chartcase to him.

His Satanic features twitching in triumph, the madman muttered and growled like a jungle cat devouring a carcass. He spread out the chart in front of him, scrutinized it for a space, then galvanized into action.

"Oberst von Leipsic," he snapped to his chief aide, "Section 37-A. 240-mm. howitzers." Rapidly he wrote the ranges on a pad, tore off the sheet and handed it to the colonel. "Five minute intervals, at the time already set."

"Ja, Excellenz." The colonel saluted and dashed out.

A similar procedure was enacted with each of the remaining aides until the room had cleared. The Black Roc then resorted to the telephone, pouring into the transmitter a code of numerals and letters that were so much Greek to the anxious Americans.

Finished, Count von Krassner laughed and laughed. He stood up and lifted a scrawny arm on high in majestic pose.

"Hail to the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies!" he cried. "Tonight he starts writing a new history of the world."

In mock respect, O'Leary and McGuffy stiffened and raised hands to helmets in salute. A crafty leer stole over the cadaverous features.

"But mighty empires, like all enduring structures, only can be erected a stone at a time. And each of those stones must be perfect. Sit beside me, Hauptmann Walsh, and call the ranges from the chart while I check each on the map. Not a mistake, I warn you." The madman's cackling laugh resounded in the tomblike room. "The Black Chamber! The Black Chamber!"

O'Leary drew a chair close to him and sat down. He faced a small, narrow window across the room. McGuffy, standing stiffly to attention by the table, dared not move until commanded. A ship landed on the tarmac. O'Leary covertly flashed McGuffy an uneasy glance. Had one of the bombing flight returned?

"The ranges, Hauptmann Walsh!" snarled the madman.

Teeth gritted in suspense, O'Leary bent to his task. Minutes dragged by and hope revived. If the ship had been one of the bombing flight, they would have been exposed long ere this.

A STRANGE premonition of disaster suddenly chilled his blood. Motivated by the dread within him, he raised his eyes from the range chart, looked across the room to the narrow window. His heart stopped beating.

Through an opening in the black drapes he saw pressed against a pane a strangely familiar face. For a moment he couldn't place the hard, swarthy features. Then memory returned.

The leering apparition was no other than Hauptmann Walsh, the

Irish renegade he impersonated. But Walsh was dead. But was he? His body had not been found. Abruptly the death-face vanished.

Everything was lost. He and McGuffy had not long to live. But the mad scientist would go with them.

As he called out a range to the unsuspecting Black Roc, O'Leary drew his Luger, his act hidden by the table. He flashed a signal of disaster to McGuffy.

The telephone on the table buzzed. O'Leary pressed his Luger against Count von Krassner's stomach.

"Don't answer it, Excellenz," he ordered. "Move a muscle, or cry out, and I shall kill you."

"What do you mean?" Not a sign of emotion in the bloodless face. "Have I not said that the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, cannot die?"

"You'll die this time. I am der Amerikaner Sky Hawk."

"Fool!" No surprise or alarm. "What do you wish me to do?"

"First, those plans in the drawer of your table."

"Take them. They can avail you nothing."

"Git 'em, McGuffy." O'Leary spoke in English. "Walsh jist looked in the window. Foller me cues. Don't draw yer gun yit."

McGuffy quickly cleaned out the drawer, stuffing its contents into the breast of his uniform.

"What do you wish now?" demanded the madman, coldly. You but augment the punishment in store for you."

"Obey my every command."

"The futile commands of a puny pawn!" That insane, jarring laugh. "Very well. No earthly power can thwart the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies. Eventually he shall triumph."

A knock on the door.

"Tell them to enter," ordered O'Leary, then in English, "Don't draw, McGuffy, but be ready with yer gat. They won't come in with guns drawn, knowin' we'd kill the Black Roc. They don't suspict we're wise to Walsh, so will try a trick to git the Black Roc out o' the room, thin finish us."

"Come in!" called Count von Krassner.

Oberst von Leipsic entered and saluted.

"Excellenz," he said, "the exalted presence of the Emperor of the Skies in 4-37-VX is necessary. Our calculations are in error."

"Oberst von Leipsic," answered O'Leary, "my Luger presses against the stomach of Count von Krassner. Don't move."

All color left the German's face and he looked to the Black Roc for confirmation of the stunning intelligence.

"It is true," informed the madman. "I am not yet ready to visit the dead, so obey him."

"V-very w-well, Excellenz," stammered the colonel. "Although it costs me that life pledged to your service, Excellenz, I must inform you that he is a spy—der Amerikaner Sky Hawk. The ranges he brought are false. Hauptmann Walsh, whom he impersonates, escaped from the Amerikaners and brought the correct ranges. We have substituted them for the false ones and the Death Rocs of Hodur shall be released as scheduled."

O'LEARY went cold all over. Harder he pressed his pistol into Count von Krassner's stomach.

"Command that the Death Rocs be held indefinitely," he ordered.

In answer the Black Roc laughed long and loudly.

"Even though I visit the dead, that command I shall not give."

O'Leary realized that the madman wasn't bluffing. There was the one answer left.

"Then we must be accorded safe conduct to your two-seater now

rolled out on the tarmac. You must accompany us into our lines, in order to insure that we are not shot down."

"Willingly." Again the Black Roc laughed. "There, even though among the ghosts I command, I can watch my Death Rocs of Hodur destroy your division, my first step to world dominance. Oberst von Leipsic, I command that these schwein be allowed to use my plane. Begone now, and publish my order."

"Very well, Excellenz." Tight-lipped, the German saluted and retired.

Soon the telephone buzzed and O'Leary answered it. It was Oberst von Leipsic, who informed that the command had been spread and the way was clear.

"Excellenz," said O'Leary, "you will march between us."

"Aye! I shall march to victory."

The tarmac was crowded with hot-eyed, sullen Germans, who sprang to attention on sight of their mad commander. Uttering a curse, Walsh jerked Luger from holster and fired at O'Leary, but the Sky Hawk's automatic had barked a split-second in advance. The renegade crumpled, a black splotch on forehead.

"You fool!" Contemptuously the Black Roc spat on the body as he went by.

Past glaring, slitted eyes the Americans hurried with their prisoner to the two-seater.

CHAPTER XI

CHECKMATE!

O'LEARY and McGuffy expected each instant to be mowed down by the guns of the Black Circus, knowing that all necessary was a spark to the powder. The air fairly crackled with tension.

While O'Leary covered Count von Krassner, McGuffy climbed into the rear seat. Emitting that blood-curdling laugh of his, the madman, on order from O'Leary, got in with McGuffy. It was a tight fit.

"I'll make him stand up to act as a bullet shield," said McGuffy, grimly. "Those babies on the tarmac are liable to blow up any moment, now."

When seated in cockpit, O'Leary said over a shoulder:

"Von Krassner, tell your men that if a ship leaves the ground, or we are fired on, we will dump you out to lighten the load!"

In no mistaken terms the Black Roc issued his orders. Low, ominous growls greeted his words, but the Germans stiffened to attention and saluted.

"Fool!" Count von Krassner spat it out. "You but invite an even more terrible vengeance than I had planned upon you and your Amerikaner schwein. The All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, cannot die."

"Ah, nuts!" O'Leary scanned the night with his cat-eyes. The air over and near the sheet-iron shed swarmed with Fokkers on guard. Eyes narrowed in resolve, he half-turned around to his partner.

"We gotta do it, McGuffy," he said. "Thim Death Rocs mustn't git loose this night, or iver."

"Shoot the works," replied McGuffy, a slight tremor to his voice. "In case I don't get another chance—so long."

"Aw revoor! I'm beginnin' to like ye."

O'Leary nodded to a frightened mechanic at the prop. The welcome roar of the motor. Although his nerves were jumping, he took plenty of time to warm her up. A cold engine would be suicide.

Unknown to him, around a corner of a far hangar, two German marksmen, Mausers resting for steady aim, waited for the plane to cross abreast of them in order to pick off the Americans.

O'Leary gave her the gun and taxied across the tarmac into the wind. Straight for the unsuspected ambush, broadside on, he went. Glinting eyes lined sights and fingers gently took up the slack on triggers.

There was no missing at the distance, aided by the large flood lights of the aerodrome.

Crack! O'Leary thudded forward against the instrument board and blood trickled down from under his helmet. Out of control, the ship would have ground-looped, only that McGuffy grabbed the stick.

Another spurt of fire from the hangar and McGuffy's right arm shattered above the elbow. Valiantly he changed hands on the stick and prevented a crack up. Blood spurting from his shattered arm he managed to take to the air. But he knew he couldn't last. A nauseating weakness was biting into his stomach and his vision was dimming. Sweat beaded his face.

As though it were drunk, wobbling and slipping, the ship climbed to two thousand feet.

Blinded with blood and his head feeling as though his skull were cracked wide open, O'Leary regained half-consciousness. Where was he? What had happened? That terrific roar battering his aching brain? He must be at sea. In a small boat. A storm was raging. How he tossed and pitched.

McGuffy collapsed in his belt.

An insane laugh screeched into the heavens as the Black Roc grabbed the controls and came about in a vertical bank to land on the tarmac.

"I told you! I told you!" he screamed.

Unaware of what had happened and that Count von Krassner was in the two-seater, down shot a guarding Fokker. The Black Circus pilot had not, in the dark, espied the mad scientist's insignia on the fuselage. Orders were to shoot down without question any and all unauthorized aircraft approaching the shed. And the two-seater was heading directly for the verboten territory.

Spandaus hammered from the diving Fokker. Steel-jackets chewed a side of the monkey-seat. The two-seater leaped forward as though suddenly relieved of a heavy weight. The Fokker streaked past.

It was what O'Leary needed, those pounding bullets and the terrific lurch of the ship as she went out of control. Instinctively he seized the stick and righted her. Brushing a hand across his eyes to clear them of blood, he shook his head fiercely to stir his sluggish brain. He glanced back. McGuffy hung slumped in his belt. But where was the Black Roc? A glance over the side.

Turning and twisting, the body of the All Powerful, Emperor of the Skies, decapitated by the machine gun burst, was hurtling downward. Horrified Black Circus pilots ran to the shapeless, bloody mess. Then pandemonium broke loose. Sirens screamed and searchlights swept the heavens. It was the signal for the Fokker patrols to shoot down the two-seater.

BUT O'Leary, in spite of the blood streaming down his face and into his mouth, had set himself for the job in hand. Nose pointed high over the sheet-iron shed, he recklessly climbed, disregarding the swarm of Fokkers waiting for the searching lights to find and betray him.

Flashing between two Fokkers, with barely enough room for wing-tips to clear, he kicked rudder, banked steeply and swung about in a hairpin turn. At last he was up wind with a chance to straddle his target. Down he plunged, eye on bomb sights. The sirens screamed on, a mad tocsin of frantic alarm.

When he was about to level off and release a bomb, two Fokkers met nose on with a staggering sheet of fire and a detonating crash, directly above him. Under the falling wreckage he streaked, missing destruction by inches.

Up rushed the shadowy blur of the mammoth shed to smash him in the face. He pulled back his stick. Wing-pin fittings jerked from sockets. The tail skid scraped the

sheet-iron roof. It was a miraculous escape. Clawing desperately to regain altitude, he found himself in a maelstrom of Fokkers gone mad.

Tearing madly through tight loop holes, he threaded a zig-zag, diving, banking, twisting path among the black wasps until again he had gained an up wind position.

Streaked down his ship. An unsuspecting Fokker in the way. Something ripped. A close call! The Fokker was gone. He flattened out. The shed in his sights. He loosed a bomb, zoomed and ruddered sharply to the right.

Below him an earthquake of smoke and flame. Wide open split an end of the shed, as though sliced off by a giant knife. Hurtling bodies! Splintering timbers! Rocked and pitched his ship in the air blast and deafening concussion.

Searchlights. Caught! Out of the betraying incandescence. Into it again. Out! Once more the dazzling beams. Valiantly, cleverly, O'Leary weaved a path upward among the Germans and again gained the position he sought. Three bombs left.

A bolt from the blue, down the two-seater shot. Now silver, now black. Silver again! Squarely in the face a blinding flash. Darkness. O'Leary released his second messenger of destruction. Up he climbed. Beneath him hell exploded.

"Missed!"

Dodging sweeping beams and Fokkers gone Berserk, scores it seemed, O'Leary clawed skyward again. Left rudder and stick over. Around he whipped. Up wind. Position again. O'Leary side-slipped and pulled his ship to a better position.

Slicing down, the two-seater flattened. Wings groaned. Two silver threads streaked from the fuselage. From end to end, the demolition bombs stabbing into its very bowels, the shed rent asunder in a monstrous, fiery gash. The twin blasts made O'Leary's ship stagger and roll.

Two direct hits! The Death Rocs of Hodur had destroyed their last American victims.

The release of the weighty bombs added new life and virility to the plane. Nobly it answered the controls.

HIS mission accomplished, O'Leary concentrated on escape. Barely a hundred feet from the ground and flying level, he skimmed like an arrow over the Black Circus hangars, nose to the south. His low altitude baffled the searchlights. Seemingly he had a chance to get free. Instantly his hopes were blighted. Magnesium flares sprung into life on the floor, turning night into day.

Fokkers roared down from the blackness above him, Spandaus pounding. Death leaped at him from all sides. Then ensued the fiercest dogfight of the Sky Hawk's experience. Blindly he banked, turned, dived, zoomed, now whipping about, now level and straight, with guns continually stuttering.

From nowhere, a German two-seater magically appeared in the mêlée, its fore and aft Spandaus yammering. O'Leary tripped triggers. The German lurched, then tumbled over and over. A searchlight trailed the crashing ship to its grave.

And, unwittingly, that searchlight saved the situation for the Irishman. Mistaking the crashed two-seater for the Sky Hawk's ship, the Fokkers quickly drew off. Quick to take advantage of the unexpected development, O'Leary straightened rudder and dashed for home.

He checked the time on his instrument board. Almost four o'clock. Dawn was beginning to streak the east. He cast a look behind. McGuffy, blood dripping, was still slumped in his belt. No Fokkers were in pursuit. But, he knew, when it grew brighter that he would be instantly spotted, then a mad chase after him, to say nothing of anti-aircraft guns.

He looked down. Roads were clogged with German infantry and field artillery, plodding steadily south for their victory drive. Victory drive? O'Leary laughed. They were marching into hell, but didn't know it. At four o'clock the American guns would rain down an avalanche of fire and steel.

Of a sudden the world split open, vomiting up fire and smoke. Dazed, he looked over the side. The Commercy highway was being destroyed again. The Death Rocs of Hodur once more were annihilating Allied troops.

But the soldiers and horse artillery below him wore *feldgrau* uniforms.

In one last desperate effort, O'Leary lifted his falling plane skyward again, then wilted, his head and arms hanging over the side. To his fading vision No Man's Land suddenly had become a sheer precipice rising out of a sea of gray sky.

Right into the American barbed wire roared the crashing ship. Hitting ground with a smash that was heard even above the heavy cannonading, it crumpled into a wreck of splintered, tangled wires and twisted steel.

WHEN O'Leary opened his eyes he found himself in a private room in hospital. His left arm and his head were swathed in bandages and he couldn't move his right leg. Next to him, also in bed, he saw McGuffy. The flier was sawing wood a cord at a time. His right arm was in a splint from wrist to shoulder.

At the foot of his bed O'Leary saw Major-General Harris and Richards talking in low tones to a doctor.

"Detail's corrict!" said O'Leary.

"There, there, you mustn't talk," admonished the doctor gently. "Too much excitement might—"

"Glory be!" burst from the Irishman. "Ixcitemint? An' in a lousy hospital! Now, ain't that a laugh? Will ye look at McGuffy there? I shure cured that bozo of leadin' with his right." Ruefully he gazed at his own bandaged left arm. "I guess we're about evin, though. Say, Mr. Richards, any o' thim damn Death Rocs come over?"

"Not a one, O'Leary. Thanks to you and McGuffy. Hear our guns still pounding. They haven't let up, and won't. What looked like certain defeat has been changed into a great victory."

"Thin it 'pears like Terence X. O'Leary, Sky Hawk, is slated to be the All Powerful, Imperor o' the Skies. I'm goofy enough."

"Wish I had a regiment of goofy ones like you," said General Harris. "I would start towards Berlin right now."

"Thanks, Gineral. By the way, Mr. Richards, ye learn anythin' 'bout thim lousy Death Rocs?"

"Plenty, in the papers found on McGuffy. They are automatic airplanes fitted with a specially adapted Sperry gyroscope as a stabilizer. They were secretly devised and developed by the mad scientist.

"Loaded with several hundred pounds of T.N.T., or other high explosive, they are capable of following a set course to a distance of fifty miles or more and then, at the predetermined time and place, will either fold or shed their wings, as desired, the fuselage plunging to the ground as a huge bomb."

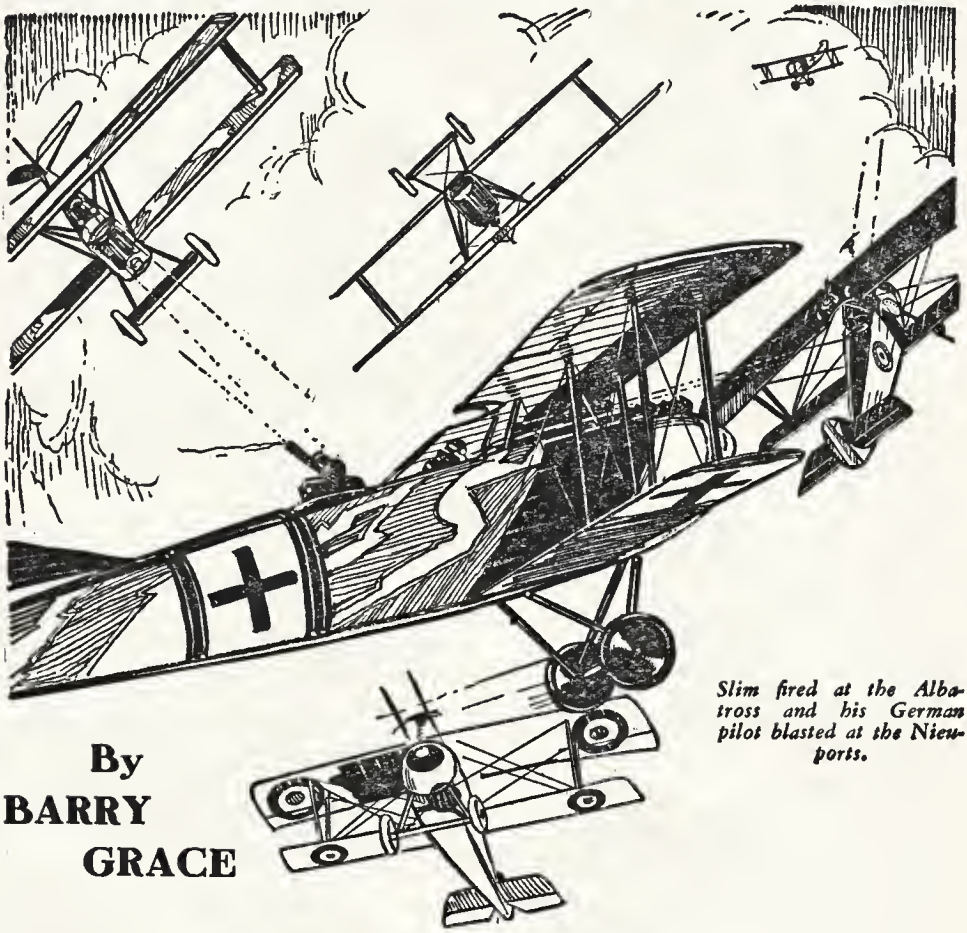
"Cripes! An' me thinkin' thim *ghosts?*"

"The secret of their invisibility and noiselessness died with Count von Krassner. Beneath the shed were large underground workshops and storage rooms for the unassembled parts. McGuffy, conscious part of time, told how you destroyed the whole shebang."

"Nuts on you guys!" sounded from McGuffy's bed. "Can't you let a fellow sleep?"

"Jist because ye're between clean sheets," snorted O'Leary, "it don't make ye the Imperor o' the Skies. That's my job."

TRIPLE TROUBLE



Slim fired at the Albatross and his German pilot blasted at the Nieuports.

By
BARRY
GRACE

It Was Back to Blooey for Slim if He Lost Any More Ships. When He Fought to Save His Last One He Didn't Know He Would Have Both Armies on His Tail.

"H'I sye. Wyke up. Yer bloomin' well wanted up front . . ."

The voice was hoarse and bellowing and faintly familiar. Slim Peterson propped one eye open with difficulty and groaned. The room was spinning past the one eye so fast that he didn't dare try it with two. They had made him study physics and science and such stuff in ground school and he knew the principle; if a room spins fast looking at it with one eye, the result is squared or cubed or something if you try two. He closed the eye.

"H'I sye. You'll blurry well catch hell . . ."

The voice was bellowing again. Slim grunted. He had an idea that he had already caught hell. There was no sense in ganging up on a fellow. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. It did not have much fur on it. That meant he hadn't been very drunk last night. It was the

chair that had done it. He remembered. There had been two Canadians breaking a chair over his head just before the lights went out. He tried the eye again. The room was steadier and he tried two. He blinked and his stomach flipped over. Willie Talbot, the orderly, was shaking him. He didn't remember Willie being on the party; usually he didn't drink with orderlies. Still . . .

He looked down his own length. He had died with his boots on last night. With his breeches on, too. But he decidedly did not know anything about getting into his own bunk. His memories had stopped in the Frog town that sounded like "Sink-sox." He sat up.

"At lawst! I jolly well despaired . . ."

"Shut up. What's the idea?" Slim didn't like Cockney early in the morning and anyway he had a vague idea that the batman should be respectful or something. Willie Talbot snorted.

"Idear? You'll blurry well find out. Yer lyte as yer blurry country getting in the war . . ."

"Never mind my country." Slim's jaw got hard and his eyes took on a belligerent glitter. It was tough being an eccentric Yank with a Swede name in a squadron of Canucks and Australians and other miscellaneous foreigners, but it was usually tougher for anybody that made cracks. Willie Talbot backed up.

"Just a little joke," he said feebly. Slim grunted. He didn't feel like quarreling. It had suddenly dawned on him that the C.O. wanted to see him and that he was late.

"What does the Skipper want?" he asked. His eyes had a wistful gleam suddenly. "Does he want me to get a balloon or something?"

The Cockney snorted. "Not 'alf. Nothink easy. Not 'im. 'E's got a gleam in 'is eye and . . ." He was suddenly wary of imprudence now that the mad Yank was fully awake. "Begging yer pardon, sir, 'e looks like 'e'd fair like to byle yer alive."

"I was afraid of that." Slim got up unsteadily; some six feet of long drawn-out Yank with a groan in his system that started at his feet and worked up. There was a mirror in the corner with a long lateral crack in it and Slim needed a shave; but he wasn't up to it. He smoothed the stubble down, set his cap on the side of his head to miss the big egg on his head where the chair had connected, and rolled out of the room.

DEAN DALY, C.O. of the 119th R.F.C., looked up from his desk with arctic ice in his blue eyes. His glance moved over the dirty uniform, hesitated briefly upon the ribbons of the D.S.O. and settled on the battered face of Slim Peterson.

"Where's your Camel?" he challenged. "The one you went to the pool for!"

"Oh. That Camel." Slim shifted uncomfortably. "You see, Major, it was this way. The engine was dud. Napoo, see? I set 'er down near our artillery and went looking for a phone." His face became mournful. "A Hun shell just spoiled all outdoors out of that ship while I was away."

"Very nice." Dean Daly's eyes stabbed. "Only your Camel is outside. When you left the artillery lads, somebody got worried and called up. They were afraid that ship would draw fire. I sent Terry Clyde down after it and he flew it here; *flew it*, Peterson."

Slim shifted again. Inwardly he was cursing that bunch of Anzac gunners. He had bought them enough liquor to float one of their guns and they hadn't had sense enough to drop a shell on the Camel when they realized that he had lost the way back.

"I can explain that now . . ."

"Yes?" Daly's lips were grim. "Maybe you can explain these." He looked down at the sheet of paper in

his hand. "A French colonel visiting our staff at Ficheux describes you perfectly as the man who made a disrespectful noise at him and who knocked down two members of his staff." Slim kept his eyes forward. Daly read on. "You are described by a report from Blaireville as the inciter of a riot in an estaminet and as the man who assaulted and severely battered an officer of the marines and two of his men."

"Marines? British marines?" Slim was startled.

"Who else?"

"I see." Slim's brow was furrowed. He wished he could remember that incident. It had never even occurred to him before that the Limies had marines. To have socked three of them and then to forget was lamentable. Daly was bent to the sheet.

"I'm charging you on the sheet as drunk last night, and confining you to the field except for actual duty over the lines."

"Drunk?" Slim's mouth opened in protest. He hadn't ever been drunk. He was about to explain about the chair, but had a change of heart. He remembered that Dean Daly was the same nationality as the chair benders. "I wasn't drunk," he said lamely.

Daly leaned back. "I say you were. You have to be. I can account for you with that charge. There are two more sheets like the one I read; defiance of military law, drawing the fire of sentries, stealing an ambulance, insulting a high ranking officer—" He broke off. "You'll take the drunk charge," he said grimly.

"Yes, sir. Thanks." Slim turned away. Daly's hand stayed him. The C.O. was leaning forward and pointing with a pencil.

"Get this, Yank," he said. "I've got a tough job. It's bad being the skipper of a ragtail outfit that the Imperials call a Colonial mob; it's worse when there's a Yank in it. You're good and I like you. You fight like seven devils, but one more break, Yank, and you're through."

"You mean—?" Slim wet his lips.

"I mean that you just dare to lose one more ship, just dare to start one more riot, just dare to bring down one more brass hat strafe on this desk —just dare it and I'll break you from here to Dover and scatter your godblasted buttons to the thrice unmentionable crows! That's all, Peterson, and get out of here!"

SLIM PETERSON got out. His face was flushed but there was a relieved expression in his eyes. The Skipper had been tough, but Slim liked them like that. He was no gentleman; he was a very hard American Swede with a yen for battle and a thirst for liquor. He belonged in a ragtail squadron and he wanted to stay in it. The few Englishmen that he had met had been amazed utterly at the fact that Slim was in the R.F.C. The Canucks and the Aussies and rest were never amazed at anything.

"I'll break you from here to Dover . . ."

The C.O.'s words rang in the Swede's aching head and he knew that Dean Daly hadn't been kidding. He ran his tongue over his lips. He needed a Kentucky breakfast: a shot of liquor and a twist of chawing tobacco. After that? He looked at the sky.

"If I can't go out, I can still go up," he drawled thoughtfully. "Reckon I'll do that. There ain't nobody objecting to me associating with Germans in a little brawl or so."

His long legs covered ground and his aching head bobbed along. The Colonials had a good ragtail bar.

An hour later, Slim Peterson was aloft. His long, lean body fitted sectionally into the tiny Camel cockpit like a folding six foot rule. He set the fine adjustment for the carburetor at the twelve thousand foot level and swept his eyes over the wide sweep of sky. He could see the gleam of the English Channel in the distance, with the hazy white outlines of the

Dover cliffs beyond; below him spread the Arras battlefield. The smoke plumes of a thousand fires flowed upward where the Germans had fired the country behind them in their retreat. The Canucks were storming Vimy to the north, but the British advance had been halted in the south just a little east of the Arras-Bapaume highway.

"Wonder what in hell they're waiting for. Ain't a German in front of 'em for miles."

Slim was looking down at the fires that marked Germany's retirement to the Hindenburg line and he was guessing. He didn't know that the staff was puzzled about that retreat and wary of a trap. He just knew that there was suddenly a lot of vacant land in France . . .

HE broke off wondering. He was suddenly aware of the Albatross two-seaters below him, two long awkward ships that circled over the burning area. Here were the messengers of Germany; the boys who would pinpoint ranges for the German guns, who would tip off the moment and the strength of the Allied advance. If?

Slim Peterson was that "if" and he was suddenly feeling good again; he had that same glow in his veins that had been there when he realized for the first time that he had slapped down three British marines. He slipped the cover off his sight, tested the Vickers, and piqued toward the wide winged ships below.

The Albatrosses could not help seeing him. There was no chance for surprise in that clear sky with a background of high cloud. Slim came like the wind. If there could be no surprise, then there would be fury. He saw the Huns swing widely and head inland for their own territory. One was flying about three hundred feet higher than the other, but it was making hard work of it and lagging back. Slim grunted.

"Engine acting up," he said. "I'll pick off the other blasted galoot first."

He kicked rudder and swerved half-moon toward the lower Albatross. He was conscious of a feeling of excitement. Here was a grand chance of getting back into the C.O.'s favor and of wiping off the messy charges on his debit sheet. Two nice, fat, juicy Huns. Speak, guns!

He hit cushioned air at the end of his dive and bounced nose-up in firing position beneath the lower Hun. The anxious gunner in the rear cockpit was leaning against the tourelle and stretching his long neck for a glimpse of the Camel in his blind spot. He didn't get that glimpse.

Coming up like a golf ball bounced on concrete, Slim went sizzling past the Hun's tail with guns spitting red. The gunner did not pull his head in soon enough.

Bending like a horse-shoe above the German—but with no benediction of good luck in the maneuver—Slim came spitting down again. The gunner was gone; swallowed up in the black pit behind his cold gun. The pilot was wiggling his cumbersome ship desperately and looking back over his shoulder. He was wearing a green helmet, a sea green. That helmet lost him any sympathy that Slim might have had in his lean body. The guns of the Camel chattered.

There was a swift jerk, a staggered zig-zag convulsive movement forward. The Albatross heeled over and went into a power dive upside down. Greasy smoke trailed out of it as it plunged downward.

Disaster dropped on Slim Peterson.

He had dismissed the second Albatross from his mind temporarily. It had been logy, laboring and in evident distress. He had been confident of his ability to overtake it in the faster Camel when the first Albatross had been disposed of. The German thought differently. Guns ringed red, the big Hun was booming down the sky on Slim's tail.

With the first whip-like crack of

lead about his ears, Slim kicked into a half roll. The blistering fire followed him and rolled him again as he tried to straighten up. He spat a splinter of strut out of his mouth and shifted his eating tobacco to his starboard cheek. His heart was beating uncommonly fast.

"Fooled me," he growled. "The dirty hypocrite. He didn't have no more engine trouble than—"

There was a terrific bang right in front of him and he pulled his head in. The Aldis sight went to pieces before his eyes. A trickle of sweat rolled down Slim's back. "Shootin'," he muttered.

His mind refused to admit that he was going to die. It refused to picture that eventuality and it likewise refused to show him a picture of what he should do to avoid a quick curtain. The split second since the Hun had jumped him seemed like hours and he knew instinctively that he would not ride out many split seconds of such shooting as this Hun was capable of. Still some cold part of his brain refused to be hurried.

"How those Limey marines would love this picture!" He did not know where the remark came from; it was as though some part of himself was kidding him. His spine curled as he made a play.

He was pushing her over into a ninety degree bank and his soul felt as though it was on tip-toe and ready for flight. He was, he knew, for the briefest tick of time, a superb target. The German could "pot him on the rise" and that would be all of it.

Concentrated hate shrieked past his ear. He felt something pluck at his helmet and there was a crash as the slug went through the half-moon windbreaker in front of him. Something thudded hard on the cockpit cowl and then he was in the vertical and whipping around fast; a very tough target even for a fast Hun scout and an impossible one for the two-seater.

The momentum of a fierce charge was carrying the Albatross by. A tawny headed gunner who flew with his hair waving in the breeze without benefit of helmet was swinging two big guns on a tourelle. Slim rolled his chewing to his port cheek, spat over-side and came whistling for that rear cockpit. The Hun pilot was turning.

The gunner was no good. His lead perforated the sky in all directions and his guns swung fruitlessly. Slim's hand pressed hard on the trips and tracer spurted. The gunner jumped back and there was a blue flash on the gun barrel where Slim's lead bounced.

Without looking back, the German pilot seemed to sense the spot. He stalled on his turn and side-slipped abruptly. Slim saw his tracers hang suddenly on air and dropped his nose. The Albatross came around and the gunner was waving through his silly ritual with the two guns again. Slim Peterson was tired of that gunner. His nose dropped fast and flame ringed the muzzles. The gunner went down behind the guns and did not come up.

The nose of the Albatross dropped instantly. In a dizzy power spin, it whirled toward the ground.

SLIM PETERSON was startled. He whipped out of his dive, curled over and looked down the sky. He had an awful yen for that ship. He wanted to lay it in the dirt because it was a good foe; by far the best piloted job that he had ever run up against. A lance in the sun, he went down after it.

The German rocketed out of his spin in a dizzy maneuver that should have torn the wings from the fuselage. He wabbled over a full kilometer of sky, saw the Camel coming after him and spun again; this time without power.

"Stalling me!"

Slim was after him hard now with all the horses under the hood. He

cut his own dive to put him between the German and the Hindenburg line. Beneath the two ships spread the blazing terrain that belonged now to nobody. The Germans had left it and the British hadn't taken it.

The Albatross came out and made a rush to cut past the Camel and dive for the lines. Slim was too fast and his guns spat curling death. The German turned and dropped again. He was almost on the ground when he came out and his intention was plain. If he got down low enough, he could hedge-hop home—provided that it was too low for the Camel.

It wasn't. There was no friendly archie beneath the Albatross here to keep Slim Peterson high and Slim was no longer thinking of glory; he was thinking of pride. This victory would never be confirmed if he got it, but he wanted it just the same.

The German pulled out abruptly over a low, scrubby patch of trees. Slim strained everything and cut sharply down on his nose. The guns cracked again. The German banked over and then—as suddenly as he did everything else—he decided to quit. Cutting the gun, he dropped past the edge of the trees and set it into a pitted plain.

"Damn! I can't shoot him on the ground and . . ."

Slim's complaint died in his throat. It died because the motor did. Choked up by the long dives and hopelessly fouled, the game little LeRhone refused to carry on. There was an awful note of finality to the sobbing "blurp" with which it went—and the trees were just under the wings.

THERE was no time to be a mental marvel. Slim Peterson figured nothing. He merely let the instinct of a pilot take the ship over and the Camel made a lunge after the Albatross.

At the very edge of the trees, a reaching branch grazed the wing. There was a snap of breaking wood and the rip of linen. The Camel ploughed through, but the nose dropped too sharply and the supporting surface on the port side was badly rent. All of Germany seemed to leap up at the Yank and he felt his frail ship touch, bounce, hit, bounce, hit harder—and then it was going to pieces around his ears.

He was in a dark train and he was roaring through a long tunnel and that was the end of it.

An amazing sight met his eyes when he blinked back to consciousness. There was a dead man propped up with his back against the tail of an Albatross two-seater and there was a live man pacing up and down.

The live man was shaking his fist and cursing furiously at the corpse.

It took that a long time to soak into Slim Peterson's dazed senses. When it did, it drove thoughts of his own predicament and the ache of his own bruises and cuts from his mind. He stared at the cursing stalker.

The man was short and stocky and blessed with a very fierce Prussian mustache. His tunic was gray and shoddy looking and a bad fit. There was a double cord on his shoulders, a Prussian eagle on his collar and a stripe of braid around the collar edges. Slim found his cud still wedged in his cheek and shifted it. He did not know much about the Germans but he had learned to read signs. This annoyed Hun was evidently the pilot who had given him such a whale of a fight. And the lad was not even an officer. He was a *feldwebel,* a non-com.

Slim's eyes went to the corpse. The man had been wearing a flying combination, but it had been opened back, evidently for an examination of his wound. The tunic underneath was dark blue and there were two stars on the one braided shoulder strap that showed. The man was wearing black boots. Slim's eyes narrowed and he grinned.

His senses were coming back into

sharp focus now and he could read this little drama without benefit of language. The spook on the ground was an artillery officer. That explained the fact that he was such a very bad gunner. He was evidently one of these fussy birds who think that the airmen are a bunch of loafers; the kind of an egg who would insist on going up for a look himself. And the poor non-com, who could pilot his old ark like nobody's business, had to go up with this washout in the rear cockpit—and now he was in a hell of a fix and taking out all the things he wouldn't dare say if the stiff could get up and stare him down.

It was a situation that Slim Peterson could appreciate. He was not an officer and gentleman himself even if he bore the King's commission. That commission of his had been an accident of war time and he liked the greaseballs better than his comrades of the officers' mess. There had been English officers with very broad "a"s that had made him feel as this dead officer had made the pilot feel. Only Slim had never been lucky enough to catch one of them dead.

He forgot suddenly that the Hun was a foe, that they were both down in a very big no-man's land and that he himself was a battered airman sprawled in a bunch of wreckage that had once been a Sopwith Camel. Slim had ended up too many times in the middle of a bunch of busted furniture for this sensation to strike him strange. A bunch of poilus one night had thrown an entire estaminet at him and, compared to that, this sudden coming to roost in a washout of a Camel was a pink tea. He lurched groggily to his feet.

The German's thick gutturals came to a stop as though he had hurled them against a wall. He turned with catlike speed on the balls of his feet and his hand dropped toward his hip. Slim was used to motions like that, too. He didn't wait for a declaration of war. His muscles bunched up and he coiled like a steel spring. The German was touching the butt of his Luger when the tornado hit him.

Straight out in a diving-tackle lunge, Slim's long body seemed literally to unfold in mid-air. His clawing fingers found the rough fabric of the Hun's breeches above the tops of his boots, slipped deftly into the hollow behind the man's knees and jerked. The Luger swung upward on an arc and there was a crashing roar as it spat lead at the indifferent sky. Slim's head found the pit of the man's stomach as they hit the earth.

The German gave an agonized grunt and Slim's long arm reached for the Luger. The German gave him no chance of getting it. He flipped it away and brought his short muscular arm in under Slim's reach. Too late, the American tried to bring his chin down on his chest where it should have been before. The German's thick fingers closed about his Adam's apple and squeezed. Slim felt his eyes popping.

"THIS guy fights just like that Cockney foot-slogger in Marseilles." The thought flashed unbidden into Slim's brain. He never could picture himself being killed, licked or even knocked out. In sober minutes, he considered his own mind rather frivolous; it never looked at the grim side of things. His knees were different; they took a realistic view of things and they knew that the life could be squeezed out of them by fingers closing on the distant throat. And the knees were coming up.

Big and bony the knees had the lean muscles of a good pair of thighs behind them. They crashed into the German a trifle below amidship and the thick fingers relaxed. Slim sucked air and lashed out with his fist. The German fell back and Slim sprawled. There was an uncomfortable chunk of metal under him and it consoled him. He was sitting on the Luger. There was a stream of to-

bacco juice rolling down his chin and most of his chew was smeared across his face. He wiped it off with his sleeve and grinned at the grimacing German.

"Hurts like hell, doesn't it?" he drawled. "A ginny coal passer did it to me once in South Brooklyn."

The German stared. Slim reached for his hip pocket and grinned again as the man winced and edged away. He came up with a square of chewing tobacco in his fist and bit off a corner. He held the chew out invitingly.

"Best thing for what ails you," he grunted. "Gets right to where the trouble is."

The German's face was blank. He quite obviously had no idea of what the Yank was talking about, but he was a man of ideas. He got his feet under him clumsily and stretched his hand out as though to accept the plug; then he pressed hard against the earth with his feet and shot forward. A chunky Hun with short arms and murderous fists.

The fight was short and bloody. Slim took a lot in the first few seconds. He got slowly to his feet under a storm of short jolts, pushed his man away with a straight left and threw his right.

The German walked right into that one and sleep overcame him on his feet. Slim blew on his knuckles, watched the man pitch forward on his face and picked up the Luger.

"Wrong-headed kind of a dub," he grunted. "Sure likes to mix."

He turned toward the Albatross and stiffened. He had had an idea that it was a write-off. It was a shock to see the prop ticking over gently and to become suddenly aware of the deep, low music of the Mercedes. He just hadn't thought about it before.

"Hell, the guy didn't have to land. He probably tried to save the artillery guy's life and when he couldn't, he cussed him. He would be that kind of a Hun."

There was a heavy lung-tickling pall of smoke in the air that told the story of what the Germans were leaving behind them. There were twelve or fifteen sprawled Germans around a cold machine gun on the other side of the Albatross, and two glittering Uhlans beyond them. Germany had left them, too.

Slim looked into the cockpit of the Hun ship. It looked strange and complicated. His mood of expectancy passed. The idea of climbing in and trying to take this big ark off lacked appeal. He remembered the F.E.s that he had cracked in training. He had been too ham-handed on the heavy stuff. His touch had been for the small and the fast and the tricky; he had never quite got the hang of big stuff. And this ship was big!

He shifted the chew thoughtfully. He could stay here where he was and maybe the British advance would pick him up; maybe, too, a German scouting party would be along first. Or there might be a hell of a barrage, or the spreading fire might get around him and cut him off. There was dry grass and it would go pretty quick when it started. He looked at the Albatross again. It spelled freedom, but . . .

"I'd crack the hell out of it trying to lift it off," he grunted. "That old wheezer just isn't my style."

THE scrape of a foot behind him brought him around fast. The German was up and charging at him. He brought the Luger up with a jerk and jabbed it into the German's breastbone as the man came in. "Dutch," he said, "I'm tired of playing cops and robbers with you this way. Hold your tail in your hand a minute and let me think."

The German didn't understand the language, but he understood the gun. He stood still, glowering. Slim's eyes kindled. "Shucks," he said, "there ain't nothin' to this problem. You can fly that ark swell, Dutch. Me, I don't have to."

He jabbed again with the gun and pointed to the ship. The German stared blankly. Slim shook him up with the gun and pointed to the Allied lines. Suddenly the German got it. He broke out in a thick flood of very profane sounding German. Slim grinned. "No soap, Kid. I bet I've been called all them things before. Hike it!"

He jabbed hard and as the German took a backward step, Slim stepped in behind him and transferred the jabbing to his spine. "You'll fly it, Kid, or croak," he said grimly. The German got the new note in his voice and walked. There was something in the way that he held his head, however, that Slim didn't like. The man was tricky and he moved quick at times. It was not going to be any joy ride going up with him. Things could happen.

They were approaching the ship now. The German was walking docilely and that indicated to Slim that the man had some sort of a plan. The dead man was leaning against the empennage staring at them. The light glinted on the two star insignia of his captaincy. Slim came to a full stop and his long arm reached out, stopping the German in his tracks. An idea had just been born.

"Dutchman," he said, "if you put on that officer's jacket you'd catch plenty of hell when you landed—if you had that on your mind. It would look like a sell out for you to be flying around with a guy in British uniform and you wearing a uniform you didn't rate. The Prussians wouldn't like it . . ."

He stopped, conscious of the fact that the German didn't get the sabby of all this talk. With much jabbing of the gun, free gestures and many yellow spurts of tobacco juice, he put his idea across. The German should trade jackets with the man who was dead.

The idea got over and for the first time, the German showed fear. He backed up, shaking his head defiantly; his eyes shadowed. Slim dropped his easy-going manner. His mouth dropped at one corner and his eyes squinted. He had a café-brawler look at the moment and it had taken Slim many years and much brawling to get that look. As a look, it was a success; as a persuader, it was equally good. The German wet his lips.

"I'll give you till I count three, Dutch. Then I'm going to blow your guts out through your ears!"

His mouth dropped further. He raised one finger and counted grimly. The second finger went up, but the German didn't look at it; he was looking at the finger that was tightening on the trigger of the Luger. He gave a choked, gasping cry and dropped to his knees. With feverish haste, he started to change clothes with the man who was dead.

SLIM made him loot the officer of papers, too; then he waved him to the plane. The German seemed suddenly subdued, but he moved sullenly and with a gleam in his eyes that held menace. Slim watched him swing up and then climbed into the rear cockpit. He jabbed with the gun to show that he still meant business and the German bent to the controls. They taxied around into the wind and started down the field. Above them the smoke blew in a curtain with the wind. It had shielded them from eyes aloft before and it was shielding them on the take-off. Slim sat back as the trucks lifted.

"Home, James," he said softly. "This is the class!"

Coming out above the smoke was like flying into a new world. The sun was high and the sky was warm and blue with high clouds blowing. The German circled his big ship as a pigeon circles on the take-off and then lined out for the Allied lines; climbing on a steep angle. Slim watched him narrowly.

All was well so far and quite normal. He looked carefully at the gad-

gets in the gunner's cockpit. There was a rack for the drums of ammo but only one drum. There was a little shelf for memo-scribbling and a tacked-down map of the front. There were duplicate controls but they were not the normal controls that Slim was accustomed to; they were evidently a compromise with space and designed only for bitter emergency. The stick was folded into a slot and lashed so that it could not accidently be interfered with by—for instance—the dead body of a gunner. There were no rudder pedals for the same reason; the rudder control was in the shape of two handles in dashboard wells. There were no instruments.

"Maybe I won't fly the hard way if I have to shoot this Hun. Ahhum . . ." Slim shifted his cud. He didn't like the set-up.

The sudden tilting of the broad wings brought him up with a jerk. He raised the Luger and was conscious of danger sweeping down on him. The pilot was tense at the controls and indifferent to the possible threat of the Luger. Slim wheeled around.

Five planes were streaking down on him out of the sun.

"Cripes!" He stuck the Luger into his belt and jumped to the twin guns swinging on the tourelle. They were heavy and awkward and he didn't understand them. He fumbled with a strange safety device and fingered the cocking handle clumsily. There was a puff of tracer to his right. He looked up.

The glint of sunlight reflected from the taut wing surfaces of the leading plane. He had a flash of tawny color and of a familiar silhouette. His tensely held breath whistled out in relief.

"Nieuports!"

His hands dropped away from the gun and he felt a sense of relief. He had nearly fired into a British patrol and . . .

The Nieuport zipped past his tail and came bouncing up. Lead stung past him and he saw shreds of fabric fly from his tail. A second Nieuport was piqueing down on him and he threw himself back from the gun as the tracers bounced by within inches of the cockpit. Sweat stood out on him and he felt the swift lurch of the plane as the pilot rolled out of the burst of a third Nieuport. Slim swung the gun and flinched as lead whanged past him and glanced from some metal part behind him with a noisy clang. The Albatross was being hammered and battered and stabbed with whistling death. The pilot flipped it around like a scout and stood it on air in every conceivable position, but the circle of eternity drew closer. The Nieuports were ringing it in relentlessly and only the superb piloting skill of the stocky German had saved it thus far.

Slim found himself admiring that German and hating the darting scouts, but he could not bring himself to return the fire; not even when he had targets that he felt he could lace with lead. It was his life or theirs probably, but they were fighting for the uniform that they wore; the moment that he pressed a trigger he would be a traitor.

THEN Fokkers came down, sleek ships that whistled into the combat in a scattered formation, guns spitting flame.

Slim wiped his arm across his forehead and felt the tremble in it. He had always taken his odds where he found them without any undue terror, but he had never faced anything before that he hadn't been willing to fight. Now, he was conscious of a sense of relief that the Fokkers had come. He knew that he would be rooting for the Nieuports to lick the Fokkers and still the Fokkers were fighting for his life.

A black nose loomed over him and he looked almost into the mouth of a gun. One of the Nieuports was coming hard at the rear cockpit.

With a hurtling zoom, a Fokker came up from the blind spot underneath and the Nieuport rolled with the fire. In a madly whirling series of acrobatics, the two ships swept away. The Albatross whirled around on its lateral axis and plunged toward Germany. Slim spun about and reached for the Luger. Then his hand dropped away with a sense of awful futility. How could he expect this German to be impressed by a pop-gun like the Luger after all the high-powered lead that he had been flying through?

A Nieuport winged across the path of the two seater and the Albatross nose swept through a steeper arc. Slim was conscious of the pilot firing and saw the Nieuport squirm desperately to escape. Slim's chew went swiftly from one cheek to another. He felt a sense of suffocation. It was the first time that the Albatross had been really in the fight. Before, they had been trying to escape; now this Hun was trying to kill somebody.

He jerked the Luger and reached out his hand; but a shadow fell over him and he whirled. A Fokker was diving down behind the Albatross. The Hun was evidently bent upon getting the Nieuport that squirmed out there under the two-seater's guns. Slim had no time for conscious thought. The Fokker was his enemy from time immemorial. He swung the gun on its ring.

With a sense of surprise, he felt the life come into the Maxim. The recoil shook his little office and tracers lined across the open sky. The Fokker reeled, plummetted to oblivion. Beside it, a Nieuport spun wildly out of control.

The two-seater had scored two victories in a split second and it had scored them over flyers from the two sides of the line. Briton and German: they both had died under guns that spat from the same ship.

There was no time to ponder that. The whirlpool of combat caught them up and tossed them about. Slim no longer compromised. He did not believe that he could stop the pilot from blazing at any Nieuport that he saw. He had to let that go. For his own part, he kept his gun warm on the Fokkers.

After a time, the Fokkers sensed a queer situation and they gave no quarter. They attacked viciously when the fates that govern dogfights gave them no chance. The Nieuports had never ceased to attack. And the Albatross got hell from all of them. It was a riddled ship and the pilot was finding it harder to toss it about. Slim had felt the bite of two bullets but they had only broken the skin; they had not penetrated. He had an idea that the pilot had been nicked, too. He didn't know.

Then it happened.

A BLACK Fokker came thundering down in a dive that would not be denied. Slim had to shoot at him hastily and the shooting was poor. He saw his tracers passing between the two planes of the left wing and then lead slashed past him so closely that he could feel the heat and hear the thin whine through the engine thunder.

The Albatross gave a convulsive jerk forward and then went end over end like a shot rabbit. Slim was all but thrown from the cockpit but he threw his arms about the swinging gun and hung on while his flesh bruised and blood ran down into his eyes. After a time, the lead shower stopped and he was conscious of a horizon that went around him like a skipping rope. They were in a spin.

He turned laboriously and saw the slumped figure in the front cockpit. It gave him a turn. He had almost learned to like that Hun. The lad had piloted like every man dreams of piloting—and now he was a snuffed light.

Slim didn't dare a glance at the earth. He needed his nerve. His

aching hands fumbled with the trick slot of the stick, with the dashboard wells of the rudder levers. He had to pilot this thing and—well, he just didn't know.

"They designed this damn thing for a blasted centipede! Where in blazes will I get enough hands?"

He fumbled clumsily with the controls, felt a little response and was encouraged. Sitting on the little swinging stool, he fixed his eyes front and adjusted the stick, rudder-ing against the spin with one hand.

The ground was almost under his trucks when he came out. In a flat, swishing recovery, the Albatross rocketed across a patch of brushy green. He saw startled figures melting out of his path and had a swift scene implanted upon his memory.

Four men about a huge cauldron of soup who threw themselves out of the way of a dreaded Hun ship—and the soup going over in the rush.

"Owww! Will they be sore. There goes the grub."

Slim's mind had no room for any other impression for the moment. He crashed. At the last minute, he lifted the nose and he was over the tops of the trees before he lost momentum. The big Hun ship plunged into the green haven and the weary frame started cracking. Slim loosened his belt with one gesture. Scraps of fabric and wood scattered for half a mile. The all but stripped fuselage went down through the trees. Slim hung dazedly to a limb.

It was quite a while before Slim Peterson was more than half conscious. The voices brought him around, thin peevish voices that wafted eerily up to him from the forest depths below. He recognized the accent before he recognized any word of what the men were saying. He grinned with relief and tried to straighten out. The troops were British and talking in high Cockney. He was home.

He started to slide painfully down and stopped aghast. One of the voices came to him clearly. "There were two 'uns in that ship. I saw them that plain. Two 'uns they were. The other 'un must be abawt. 'E' didn't fly."

"Two Huns!" Slim pondered the fact that he was one of them. If he slid down clothed in his R.F.C. uniform, he might get away with it but he doubted it. Men who have had their dinner spilled are not disposed to be reasonable. He couldn't explain how he got in that ship and make any Cockney believe it. He'd probably be hanged as a spy or something. He shuddered in closer to the tree trunk and stayed.

IT took Slim Peterson forty-eight hours to get back to the drome. British flyers had reported a combat with a German plane in which the gunner wore a British uniform. Several of them testified that the man had been firing at them—and that was understandable.

The ground report on the Hun ship's crashing accounted for the German, but not for the man in British uniform. There was an alarm out and orders to pick him up. Slim sifted hungrily through the patrols; a battered human who felt like a wolf.

In the forty-ninth hour, he slid into his own drome. Dean Daly was crossing the road from the hangars. He stopped short at the sudden apparition. Dirty, bloody, bruised and disreputable, Slim looked like a man who has picked the wrong British marines. He tried to salute and Dean Daly snorted.

"I suppose you can explain, Peterson? Where have you been—AND WHERE IS YOUR PLANE?"

Slim wet his lips. He had rehearsed his story and it was God's truth, but he suddenly realized that it wouldn't do. He couldn't imagine Dean Daly believing it. He shrugged his shoulders mournfully.

"Skipper," he said resignedly. "I been drunk again."

PATH OF GLORY

By
BURKE McARTHUR

They Said He Was Too Old to Fight and They Tried to Ride Him Out of the Air. When He Handed Them the Broken Wings of the Baron and the Accolade of Death, They Knew, Old as He Was, That He Had Something None of Them Had.

Old Malachi threw his Spad into the Fokker's tail.

A SPAD came spinning down toward the training field at Issoudun. Its motor was full out, its noise the roaring as of all the Bulls of Bashan. Pilots who today, or tomorrow, or next week, would be sent to the Front as finished pursuit pilots, came out of hangars to stare up at the madly spinning crate. A sergeant mechanic spat copiously into the dust, squinted an eye at the falling crate, and said to nobody in particular:

"That's Old Malachi Shafer, and he'll get his this time, sure!"

"Somebody," said a lieutenant, "has been saying that ever since Shafer left Kelly. That's months ago, and here he still is—for a minute or so!"

In the "office" of the Spad, a man with lined face tanned to the consistency of saddle leather, with eyes as deeply blue as the sea, watched the ground come spinning up to meet him. It was like a great turning table, whirling at crazy speed. The lips of Old Malachi moved. As his lips moved, as though he were sending commands to his calloused hand on the stick, to his hard feet on the rudderbar, his hands and feet moved to bring the Spad out of its spin. The nose came up just over the field. It came up, and up and still up. The Spad went up in a wing-buckling loop from an altitude at which its wheels were almost on the ground. At the top of the breathtaking, suicidal loop, it didn't half roll out. It started on down.

Watchers held their breath. They couldn't see the calmness in the eyes of the man in the pit. All they could see was the wild speed of the Spad, hear the blasting roar of a Hispano full out. That Malachi, this time, would wash himself out, was a foregone conclusion. The Spad went on over, executing the loop by the grace of whatever gods watch over some flyers and all drunkards. But it didn't escape entirely. It went in for a landing out of the loop. The wheels struck first. The tail went into the air. The whirling prop, even as Malachi Shafer reached for the switch, remembering the possibility of fire, dug into the ground with a crash. The plane somersaulted. It lost first one wing, then the other. Then parts of the fuselage came off, to scatter themselves on the face of the tarmac.

Watchers held their breath. Malachi Shafer hadn't the slightest chance of emerging from the crash alive. The wreckage came to a stop. Black smoke welled forth, with orange flames in its midst. There came the shrieking siren of the crash wagon, the shouts of men racing to the scene of the crash. Hands tore madly into the débris, reaching for the remains of the pilot. He would, they all believed, be broken into many pieces; but the pieces would be pieces of a brave, determined man, so should be saved. One never knew what might come out of the wreckage of a crash.

They dragged Old Malachi forth. He was grinning ruefully.

"Well," he said softly, "all I can say is that if all the planes I've busted up had been Heinies, I'd have been an ace twice."

An orderly came dashing up, saluted Old Malachi.

"The Commanding Officer's compliments, sir, and Lieutenant Shafer is to report to headquarters office immediately."

"This time," said Lieutenant Oberlin, "they'll wash you out, Dad. You ought to know by this time that this is a young man's war."

Malachi Shafer's face hardened. There were little trickles of blood at the corners of his mouth. A patch of skin hung over his right eye, and blood ran down his cheek from the dirt filled wound.

"Listen, kid," he said softly, grimly, "I've always got one answer for brats like you. Any fool colt can snort in the morning, but it takes a seasoned old plowhorse to be able to snort at night. Okay, son, tell the Old Man I'll be right along—and to Hell with his compliments! No, don't tell him that."

There was a sag to Malachi's step as he moved away from the group which had rescued him. His legs were bowed. His shoulders stooped slightly forward. His arms swung limply at his sides. The weight of the world's responsibilities seemed to be carried on his broad back. The others looked after him with a surging of sympathy.

"What, do you suppose," said Oberlin, "possessed a man like that to go in for air? He never got those bowlegs learning to fly. It took years on the farm to bend 'em like that. He must be somebody, though, for it took pull to get the waiver he must have managed to get a commission in Uncle Sam's Air Service."

The others shook their heads. They stared after the retreating form of Old Malachi Shafer. They smiled twistedly with sympathy as they saw his shoulders straighten, saw him walk as erect as a younger soldier, when he knocked on the door of the C.O. Then they turned away.

LIEUTENANT Malachi Shafer stepped into the presence of the Old Man and stood stiffly at attention.

"Lieutenant Shafer reporting for duty, sir."

Colonel Kline looked up. A frown furrowed his grizzled brow.

"That makes seven planes you've cracked up, Shafer," he said. "Tell me, oldtimer, how old are you?"

"Considerably younger than the Colonel, sir."

Kline's face clouded with anger, but

one look into the eyes of Old Malachi showed him that the flyer meant no insolence.

"But I don't try to fly, Shafer," said Kline. "This is a young man's war."

"So the brats out there just told me, sir," said Shafer quietly. "I still don't believe it, begging your pardon, sir."

"How old are you?" repeated Colonel Kline.

"Thirty-one, sir!"

"I know that's what your service record says. I want the truth, just between the two of us."

"Well, sir, I didn't lie much when I held up my hand—not more'n the Lord will forgive me for, I guess. But, well, give or take ten years and you'll have some idea. I'd be the last man to go against my own oath."

"And you managed to get to France, to Issoudun?"

"Seems like it sir. And that's not all. I'll get to the Front, too!"

"And get killed your first combat!" snapped the Colonel. "I can't permit this to go any further, Shafer. It's murder on my part. You're just about ten years too old. Your eyes are good enough, but never as sharp as those of a man half your years. Your judgment of distance isn't as good, either. And your bones! At your age they're brittle . . . brittle as Hell. Every crash will mean broken bones. Your brain doesn't work as fast as a younger man's . . ."

Malachi Shafer leaned forward suddenly, knuckles down on the top of the desk.

"Listen, Colonel, you've just said I've cracked up seven planes. Three of 'em were total losses. I reckon I owe the government something for them. I mean to pay it. But in all my crashes, how many broken bones have I had? I've got the Shafer luck. It'll stay with me—"

"It can't last forever. Listen, Shafer, I hate to do it, but I've no alternative. I'm going to blooey you to something on the ground."

Malachi Shafer straightened, hands along the sides of his thighs in the exact manner prescribed by drill regulations. Great beads of perspiration burst forth on his forehead and cheeks. He moistened his lips with a dry tongue, groped for words, gulped and swallowed.

"I GUESS, sir," he said at last, in a low voice, "that that just about knocks down my meathouse. But there's just a few words I'd like to say. They've all asked me how come I'm in the Air Service. I haven't told anyone, yet, but I'm a-telling you, sir. Listen, Colonel, all my life I've worked like a dog. I was a farmer. My father, and his father before him, were farmers. They never left their own county. Their longest journey was to the county seat to pay their taxes."

"Until the war broke out I was just like 'em. But down in my heart I longed for adventure, knowing all the time, as the years crept up on me, that I'd never travel further than the county seat, either—and all the time with my brain full of what might lie just around the corner, or over the hill, or beyond the seas, when my imagination was really let go. I lied—might as well admit it—and signed up with the younger men from my state. I got into the service. I worked everything I knew, when I discovered the Air Service, to get in, to get my wings.

"I guess I've died a dozen times, to get this far, with never a bone broken. I've got just one wish in my heart, Colonel—if I can just crack down once—just once, mind you—on a Heine, with my Vickers going, I'll take a dozen busts in the back to pay for it. It isn't a question of courage. It isn't a question of anything, but just a dream come true.

"Yes, I've dreamed of it and I guess maybe that's what's kept me from rubbing out entirely in my crashes. All you've said is true, sir, but . . . well, I'm not begging. I'm just telling you. Wash me out, and I'm through. All the kick goes out of the war for me and that damned farm is right around the

next corner, waiting for me to go back and spend the rest of my days.

"Take yourself for instance. You're old, too, but you've had your day, or you wouldn't be a colonel. Most of your life you've known adventure at first hand. Put yourself in my place. You're rich in memories, if nothing ever happens to you again. I'm rich in memories, too—of following a mule's tail up a furrow to the end of my days, unless . . ."

Colonel Kline blew his nose explosively. There was a suspicion of moisture at the corners of his eyes which Malachi Shafer did not see. The colonel shifted in his seat, reached for a pencil, began to tap the rubber end on his desk. Finally he looked up at Shafer again.

"Get the hell out!" he said.

And Old Malachi left, treading on air. He hadn't, at least, been definitely washed out. Behind him the Colonel sat for a long moment in thought. Then he called his adjutant.

"You heard?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't do the right thing, did I?"

"No, sir. The man is too old—"

"Quite so. Quite so. Well, it's done, but if there were a way to make Malachi Shafer ask for a transfer from air duty, or even for transfer to two seaters, where he could fly observer—though his eyes aren't any too good for that—I'd draw a breath of relief. For mark my words, Purdy, Malachi Shafer will get his the first time over. I've got an idea, though. Shafer goes to the *estaminet* every evening for one drink. Maybe he thinks that's part of the adventure. Anyway, after he's gone, I want to talk to his wingmates."

MALACHI'S wingmates were duly called in when Malachi, stepping high and pridefully, had vanished toward the *estaminet*. The colonel's words were brief and to the point:

"Ride Malachi Shafer out of the air!"

But even as Shafer's wingmates grinned and nodded, Colonel Kline had his doubts. So had his adjutant. Malachi's wingmates had no doubts, for they were young and believed in themselves. Lieutenant Oberlin made the first move when Malachi returned an hour later.

"Well, grandpop," he said, "they say that the average life of a pursuit pilot at the Front is seven minutes. That means *young* pursuit pilots—pilots with their eyes and ears about them, and with bones that aren't brittle as putty . . ."

Shafer's eyes narrowed. There had been plenty of goodnatured joking at his expense since he had joined up, and cracked up seven crates after his first solo. But it had been the gibing which every pilot had had to undergo. This time, though, there was a difference, a veiled hostility which went over and beyond jesting. And the Colonel's words to him still rankled. Not even the glow of a drink of cognac in his stomach had stopped the sting. He didn't understand the changed attitude he felt in the wingmates with whom he expected to go to the Front. Oberlin went on, his voice rasping, hard.

"You've got a crust, pop," he said, "trying to get to the Front with *us!* Think we want your slowness to put us by way of pushing up daisies, just because you can't see the handwriting on the wall?"

"Listen, kid," said Malachi Shafer, his voice low, terrible. "I'm here to do my job as I see it. I won't be stopped by anything on two feet, understand. And I won't stand for that 'pop' and 'grandpop' stuff, see? You swallow that—or this pair of fives!"

Malachi showed Oberlin his closed right fist. Oberlin grinned.

"Why, you old fossil, you couldn't whip one side of me!"

Next moment Lieutenant Oberlin, in the midst of a silence that could have been cut with a knife, was picking himself up from beneath the mess table, his right hand covering an eye that would be tight shut in five more

minutes. And Malachi Shafer, his back very straight, was striding to the door. He didn't look back.

Next morning there was salt in copious quantities in his coffee. His meat was seasoned until a castiron stomach would have refused it. He knew that all eyes were on him when he sat down to breakfast. He didn't understand what was happening, but he wouldn't be balked. Without a change of expression on his face he drank the coffee, ate the meat, and asked for seconds on both. The seconds were not doctored. They helped to dilute what had gone before so that Malachi could retain it. When they had all finished and shoved back from the table, Malachi said quietly:

"Somebody else is asking for a black eye! You, Oberlin?"

"No, Shafer," said Oberlin, "not just now. I won't fight you. There's too much difference . . ."

Malachi swelled up belligerently, started toward Oberlin. But Oberlin went on, deadly calm.

"I won't fight you because you won't be here long, Shafer, that's why. I wouldn't lessen your chances by so much as a broken nose or a cracked knuckle. You need all the breaks you can get. I'm laying off."

"And the rest of you had better follow Oberlin's example," said Malachi grimly. "I don't know what the stunt is, but I aim to be here until the cows come home."

Somebody started to make a joke about the matter of cows, but one look at the granitelike, pale face of Malachi Shafer deterred him. The jest went unspoken.

And that day twelve pilots were ordered up to the Seventh Pursuit Group, directly across the lines from the Forest of Conflans. The job of the Seventh was a tough, hazardous one. They had the task of keeping observing eyes on activities at the famous, important railhead, guarded below by every conceivable kind of anti-aircraft, aloft by the best flyers of the Fatherland. Men flew over Conflans and did not return. It was a regular thing. That's why twelve replacements were needed for the Seventh.

THERE was a silent feud between Malachi Shafer and his wingmates, which was communicated to the few remaining veterans of the Seventh, under Captain Bigelow. Shafer was a flyer apart. He was a menace to his wingmates in formation, a source of irritation and responsibility when he flew alone. They didn't know exactly what to do with him, so they did nothing; bore with him as best they could. And the lines in Malachi's face became deeper. His eyes receded into his head. Now and again, when nobody was watching him, he seemed to be looking at his wingmates with an air of beseeching, like a dog that has been whipped but is too proud to thump his tail and ask for forgiveness.

And that was the situation when, next morning after the replacements had been amalgamated with the Seventh, Captain Bigelow issued quiet orders.

"We strafe Conflans today. We do not return as long as we can fly—unless I signal. If I am knocked down, Lieutenant Parsons is in command. After him . . . well, you all know the order of rank. And a final word: Baron Bleucher has taken over command of the staffel protecting Conflans. You know what that means."

They did. A more merciless flyer could not have been found on any Front. Bleucher was a savage, a great tactician, a relentless foe. He had twenty-one Allied planes to his credit. This was his first day at Conflans. Word had trickled through that he had made certain boasts: to get two Allied flyers for every flyer he lost, if he had to get them himself.

Malachi Shafer listened with all his ears. His eyes looked like holes burned in an army blanket. Little fires glowed, deep down inside those eyes. Captain Bigelow's eyes swerved from man to man, settled for a moment on Malachi,

passed on. He said nothing, but he had heard much. He hesitated, then named the men who were to go over with him. Malachi Shafer was one of them. All eyes turned on Malachi, who was smiling broadly, for the first time since his wingmates had sent him to Coventry. His smile vanished when he saw the doubtful expressions on the faces of his wingmates, They didn't want him. They'd shown that very plainly. And why not? Because they were afraid of what he might do, or fail to do. Damn it, couldn't they see that all he asked of them was a chance?

He vowed, then and there, that if he just realized his dream, to exchange hot lead with an enemy, riding the sky lanes with his motor full out, he would gladly die, and with a song of thankfulness on his lips. It wouldn't be hard to die, if he could see his dreams come true.

HE was the first to the deadline when motors began to tick over. He was the first into the pit, and even his greatest enemy among his wingmates knew that his Spad was in the best possible shape for the flight, for Malachi was painstaking in his examination prior to the take off. Captain Bigelow lifted his hand. The chocks were pulled. The twelve Spads started away from the deadline. Malachi Shafer went at his task with grim concentration. This was his day, the day his dreams were to come true. Let him once get off the field, and nothing could stop his dream's fulfillment.

He gauged his distance carefully as he fled across the tarmac. He mustn't get too close to the flyers on either side of him. An accident at the take off, and Malachi Shafer would be through.

He shoved his stick forward, got his tail off, came back, rose from the tarmac with the others, apparently with the same ease and smoothness. But sweat was bursting from every pore. Malachi Shafer hated flying in formation with these men, because he felt they hated him. There was something glorious in the rising and falling of wings, but the glory was lost to Malachi because, whenever he looked across the abyss which separated him from this wingmate or that, nobody met his gaze, every flier studiously avoided looking at him. It was as though they said:

"You don't belong up here! Wings are for the young, in this war!"

And Malachi's lips shaped the answer to the fancied insult.

"Yes? I'll show you, give me time and opportunity."

The twelve planes, flying a wide semi-circle, with Malachi Shafer somewhere near the center, as though the others were there to protect him from all harm, headed eastward for Conflans. When the archies at the lines began to flower about the swift-flying ships, Malachi Shafer's heart thumped with joy. Here it was! And he was in it! Here was part of his dream, coming true. At that very moment the plane to his right seemed all at once to disintegrate, like the one hoss shay—and bits of wreckage went floating down the sky. Shafer searched in the midst of it for something, *anything*, that might resemble the pilot across at whom he had looked but a moment before. There was nothing.

"And he went west, hating me, thinking I didn't belong," said Malachi to himself. "But the archy didn't spare him because he was young, and me right here beside him. Surely that means something, if only that the Shafer luck still holds."

The eleven remaining Spads closed in from right and left, closing the hole. Captain Bigelow didn't even glance aside. His eyes searched the sky for hostile aircraft. Nobody knew better than Bigelow the Hell for which the Seventh was destined. It was all in the day's work, a tragedy like this, but it was Hell just the same.

Malachi Shafer glanced right and left again, noted the stiff profiles of the others, and how their eyes searched the heights, then looked straight ahead, toward the objective which was

coming to meet them at express train speed. Winged things — Fokkers, Albatrosses — were rising from the woods about Conflans as though shot from some hidden catapults. Shafer's stomach seemed to tighten. The sky whirled. Bigelow was signaling. His signal said:

"Every man for himself when the shooting starts!"

"Good!" said Malachi to himself. "That will give me the chance I've always wanted."

He spoke fiercely into the slipstream, and his words were a sort of prayer. He leaned forward in his pit, as though by so doing he would increase his speed. His heart hammered with excitement. His excitement was communicated to his hands and feet. He all but locked wings with the flier to his right, who occupied the area of sky which, ten minutes before, had been filled by the Spad and pilot whom the archies had accounted for. The flyer looked at him, shook his fist. His face was a twisted mask, pale.

"He's afraid!" shouted Malachi to himself, wonder in his heart. "How could a man be afraid, when the path of glory flowed on just ahead of him? What more could a man want than to die as the last man had died? Of course, it would have been far better to die before German Spandaus; but the vanished flyer had not been a replacement. He'd strafed Conflans before. He had had his day of Glory. He should have gone out satisfied."

The enemy ships were sliding into formation, rendezvousing at about seven thousand feet. Bigelow was watching them with grim concentration. All eyes were glued on Bigelow, watching for other signals.

Bigelow gave his crate a bit more juice, as though he were unable to contain himself in patience, as though he were more eager even than before to come to grips with the enemy. The two armadas rushed on. Shafer was like a stone man in his pit. His eyes did not blink. His hands hovered over his trips. He kept his eyes glued to Bigelow's Spad. He was waiting, and no flyer who had even flown over Conflans had been cooler, more sure of himself.

The two opposing forces were almost within range. Conflans was dead ahead, no further than half a mile. Bigelow suddenly tilted his nose down, ignoring the oncoming enemy ships, and put his Spad into a screamng dive, heading straight for the heart of Conflans. The others streaked down after him. His strategy was plain. He had been sent to harry and strafe Conflans and he was going to do it in spite of Hell, high water, and all the German planes that flew.

THE railhead was coming under them. Running figures on the ground were German soldiers, racing for cover from the diving birds of prey. None of the Seventh looked up, though it was a foregone conclusion that the Germans were diving, too. Bigelow brought his nose up and with motor full out, started across the face of Conflans. Shafer allowed a wild yell to issue from his parched throat as Bigelow let go with his Vickers, his targets the running men. Other men on flat cars, engine crews, anything that lived and walked or ran in Conflans. Shafer's Vickers were jumping and bouncing under his hands. His eyes were glued to his ringsights. He was taking careful aim.

Something made him glance to the right, then to veer off to the left as though a bee had stung him. The flyer on his right had just died with a burst in the back from a pair of Spandaus. His crate was running wild with motor full out. The pilot's head lolled on the cockpit coaming. A Fokker had ridden across the flyer's tail, blasting him into eternity with a long burst of hot lead. Shafer stared at the calm German, and saw a streamer flying rigid in the slipstream from the German's falcon's-hood helmet.

This man who had just downed one of Shafer's wingmates was the skipper of the Germans, perhaps even Baron Bleucher — "Bloody" Bleucher himself! Shafer's fingers fairly itched on his trips. Bleucher, if it were Bleucher, leapfrogged the man he had just downed, even as the Spad started its last spin for the earth below, and fastened his Spandau fangs in the back of another member of the Seventh. Thus Bleucher made his second kill in as many seconds. Malachi Shafer, forgetting his age, forgetting the feud with his wingmates, forgetting everything except that here was his dream, in the person of the German commander himself, screamed like a wounded animal, while all the sky about him seemed to be tinged slightly with the color of fury.

He banked right. His Vickers started chattering, but he had scarcely let go with them that he knew he had scored a miss. The man ahead of him turned, looked back, thumbed his nose at Shafer. Malachi gritted his teeth, tried again. His Vickers grew white-hot under his hands. He concentrated on his enemy. He didn't see the next signals of Bigelow. He didn't see anything — except the German who had just downed two of his fellows.

HE didn't know that Bigelow had beckoned to his flyers, one by one as he caught their eyes, waving them all home. He didn't see that the sky had suddenly spilled Fokkers and Albatrosses like hail over Conflans, nor did he realize, as the great German accepted the gauge of combat, and swung easily into a series of aerobatics that flew Malachi Shafer dizzy, that the Seventh was being systematically, certainly, hazed homeward. The Germans outnumbered the Allies two to one and were making full use of their advantage.

In the center of a whirling dogfight that filled all the sky, Baron Bleucher was playing with Malachi Shafer. He must instantly have realized that he flew against a fledgling. He contented himself with keeping out of harm's way, while ceaselessly, carefully, filling the wings of Shafer's Spad with bullet holes. He stitched his monogram on Shafer's tail surfaces, in his fuselage, and missed Shafer himself only because it had come to Bleucher that if he knocked Shafer down over his own drome, the effect on enemy morale would be of untold value to Germany. It was a game. The Spad and her pilot were merely pawns for Bleucher to play with.

Shafer did not realize any of this, though he congratulated himself that the Shafer luck still held, while the minutes passed into eternity and he found himself still a-wing. The chattering of his Vickers was a song of realization in his ears. The roaring of his motor was peace to his soul. His hands and feet worked automatically after the first minute or two. It was still Bleucher . . . Bleucher . . . and the sky was empty of anything else that flew.

It was the jamming of Shafer's guns which brought full realization to him, for it gave him pause to look around. His eyes opened to their widest extent as they surveyed the sky, while Bleucher circled to come back at him with another burst. He saw that there would be no help for him from his wingmates. They had been systematically cut out of any chance of getting in a burst at Bleucher. Bleucher's "gentlemen" were holding back the Seventh, allowing Bleucher to play his game as he saw fit.

And of the twelve Spads which had flown over, six were left . . . and even as Shafer counted them, there were five. One was rolling down the sky in flames. An all consuming anger, the anger of a man who allows anger to possess him slowly, caught at the throat of Malachi Shafer. So, he was being played with, eh? And his wingmates had seen it all, were seeing it now when they had a chance to see anything but the Fokkers which hammered at them from all sides. They

were seeing him being used as a chopping block, as an example for the inspiration of other German flyers. And his guns were jammed!

Bleucher was slanting in from the side. His Spandaus were flaming savagely. Their bullets were hammering into Shafer's motor housing, edging back, inevitably, reaching for Shafer in his pit. Malachi, suddenly seeming to swell in his pit with the might of his anger, would not be put out of the running so easily . . . and he went into what he did with his eyes wide open. He deliberately banked straight toward Bleucher's Fokker! The great German saw his intention and zoomed madly to escape . . . but he didn't move fast enough. The propeller of Shafer's Spad bit into his tail surfaces. Shafer lost all surety of knowledge, for the collision had done something to his ship.

He knew he was falling. The ground, behind his own lines, was spinning up to meet him, as it had done many times before, when he had ended in a crash and had walked away from the wreckage. Nobody could have followed him at the dizzy speed he was making. His Spad spun down.

No, he wouldn't be able to slide over his own lines. They were still ahead, though the German trenches were behind him. He must land in No Man's Land. Would the Shafer luck continue to hold? He whirled to look back. The sky was a maelstrom in which his blurred gaze could make out nothing for a certainty. But he thought he saw a Fokker dropping out of the area of sky which he had just left, a limping, all but disabled Fokker. Then he turned his attention back to the ground.

There was nothing to do but go in. He went in as he had last gone in at Issoudun. He rolled into a shellhole, loosening his belt, leaping from the cartwheeling Spad. He slid along the ground, rolled, somersaulted. His skin was broken in a dozen places. Bullets were cracking the air about him as the Germans tried to make sure of his passing. He dropped into a shellhole. A projectile missed the Spad by mere feet as the Allies cut down on the ship to make sure that it did not fall into German hands. Had he remained with the ship another minute he might . . .

Yes, he might have got it, for the second shot smashed the Spad into a mass of débris. Shafer grinned to himself. He searched the sky for his wingmates, but the sky was empty. The fight had drifted behind the lines, into Allied sky, beyond his vision. He lifted his face above the shell crater. Bullets instantly snapped about his ears. He ducked down, but not before he had seen movements of gray troops—men darting toward him. They were out to capture a Yankee airman. Soldiers in the Allied trenches were coming toward him, too, to beat the Germans to it.

Shafer gritted his teeth. The Yankee infantry wouldn't have to pull *him* out of any mess. He rose from the shellhole with a rush, turned westward, and ran. He zig-zagged as he ran, dropping into holes, going out again, running like a scared rabbit. The parapet of the friendly trench loomed just ahead, though it came to him that it might as well be as far away as the moon. He ran . . . ran endlessly. A bullet knocked the heel off one of his shoes, but he stumbled and staggered on.

Just as he topped the parapet something struck him with piledriver force atop the head. He had a sensation of falling . . . then darkness.

HOW many hours had passed when he opened his eyes he had no idea. The sun was well down the sky to the west. It might well be the next day, but he didn't think so. He stirred. A captain knelt over him.

"All right, soldier?" asked the captain.

"Sure. I'll be going back now."

"Far be it from me to stop you. I've got business of my own."

And so, bedraggled, ragged, almost exhausted, Malachi Shafer finally stumbled afoot onto the tarmac of the Seventh. Just before he reached it he saw a Fokker dive on the field, heard the chattering of bracketed Lewises.

He saw an orderly race to Captain Bigelow, who stood at the deadline. Something made Malachi increase his stride, when what he most felt like doing was lie down. Bigelow was just opening the message when Shafer stopped before the now pitifully small group which was all that was left of the Seventh Pursuit. Bigelow searched the message, his face a harsh mask. Then he looked up, stared at Malachi with widening eyes.

"Bleucher has come out of his shell," he said quietly. "For the first time in the war, that anybody knows of, he has challenged a man to single combat. It's for you, Shafer. He chooses the fool that tried to crash him this morning. He says he knows the man's alive, for he saw him duck into a shellhole after he crashed."

"I'm ready," said Shafer quietly. "Which ship shall I take?"

Bigelow's face was grim.

"Listen, Shafer," he said, "I'm not saying that you haven't done well, but you're not going out after Bleucher. This is the first time a solo flyer has had a crack at him and we've got to make the best of it. Don't you realize that he just played with you until you pulled that crazy stunt, by accident, and forced him down? He's crazy about that. Maybe he'll take chances. Whoever goes against him must be someone with a chance of winning."

Bigelow looked around him. Shafer followed his glance. Of the Seventh pilots who had been attached when Shafer and his wingmates had joined, not one remained, except Bigelow himself. The others were fledglings, with just this one last fight under their belts. Bigelow smiled a little.

"It looks," he said, "as though I'm elected."

Bigelow signaled to the greaseballs to rev up his ship, strode to the apron. Shafer hobbled after him, protesting, while Oberlin and the others looked after him, pity in their eyes—and amazement that such a man could never learn when he had had enough.

The Spad was revved up, roaring at the chocks. Bigelow signaled, even as he started to climb in, for the chocks to be yanked free. The greaseballs acted with speed, and Malachi Shafer, too old to fight, jumped in. He grabbed Bigelow by the back of his flying coat, yanked him away from the Spad, spun him around, then downed him with a savage right to the jaw.

By this time the rest of the Seventh was closing on Shafer, thinking he had gone utterly mad. Shafer, half into the pit, kicked Oberlin in the mouth just as that officer reached for his heels. Shafer was in the pit, feeding the crate the juice, when the others grabbed—just too late.

THEY were racing for other crates when he lifted Bigelow's Spad off the tarmac. He looked back, grinning, to see Bigelow pick himself up, wave his arms, start running for the other Spads. Malachi Shafer, wasting not one second of time, held his Spad at an elevation of two hundred feet, often less, and slammed for the lines at top speed. Bigelow had said that Bleucher would be waiting over the lines, where the fight would be held in full view of both armies in the sector. It was there that Malachi Shafer found him.

He looked back as the man with the streamer on his helmet streaked down at him, Spandaus flaming as though he would make an end in the first few seconds of battle. Five Spads were coming on at top speed. But as Shafer joined with Bleucher, the five Spads rose to some four thousand feet to watch. With battle joined, all they could do was watch for fair play.

Malachi, remembering what he had done to Bleucher before, aimed directly at him, but held his fire. Bleucher's Spandaus ranted and chattered. Malachi grinned. He knew that

Bleucher would wonder why he didn't turn loose his Vickers. If the Shafer luck held, well, he would see. Bleucher ducked and dived, and his guns were never silent for a moment. They stitched holes in Shafer's wings, his fuselage, his dash. He systematically cut Shafer's Spad to ribbons. All the time, with ridiculous ease, the great German avoided the attempts of Shafer at collision. And it was for collision that Bleucher, after a time, watched for.

So it must have surprised him greatly when Shafer suddenly let go a burst from his Vickers, in the midst of a headlong charge, which ripped and tore at the wings and fuselage of the Fokker as though they had been the visible fangs of an invisible bird of prey. Wildly Bleucher rolled out of line of sights. And Shafer tried again to throw his Spad into the Fokker's cockpit. When Bleucher tried to avoid that attack, Shafer switched back to his Vickers. And then . . .

With a wingbuckling turn, Bleucher sat on Malachi's tail. Bullets smashed over Malachi's shoulders. Sledgehammers smashed into Shafer's back. Every bone in his body seemed to turn to water, as his Spad jumped, then started to spin downward.

"The bones of the old are brittle!"

But he gritted his teeth, fighting off weakness, swearing to himself that it shouldn't end this way. Bleucher was on his tail, hammering away—savage, relentless, sure. Shafer decided on one more try.

He slid out of sight in his pit, as though mortally stricken, and listened with all his ears to the roaring of the motor behind him. Bleucher, the sound said, was creeping up for a last burst, to make absolutely sure. Shafer, closing his eyes for the first time in any combat, yanked the stick back into his belly. He felt her go up with a rush—up and over. He knew that Bleucher would be able to avoid his rush with ease. Over in a loop, then slant down on Bleucher's tail.

But when he was over, he still stayed down in his pit. Through the myriad of holes Bleucher had smashed into his fuselage, he searched for his enemy. Bleucher, sure now that he dealt only with a ship which flew full out, out of control, had drawn off to the side, watching.

The Spad was diving past Bleucher and still Shafer remained hidden, until exactly the right moment. Then feet and hands moved on stick and rudderbar, swinging his nose into line. His Vickers began to chatter. He raised his head like a turtle coming out of its shell.

Black smoke was coming forth from Bleucher's motor housing . . . and there were flames, too. Shafer, knowing it the right thing to do, followed the dying ship to the ground, Vickers smashing away at Bleucher, whose body jerked and writhed in his pit. The Fokker went into the ground. Darkness fell for Shafer. His Spad went in behind the Fokker.

TWO hours later the door of the Seventh's mess shack banged open to admit an apparition. It was ragged, bloody, battle stained . . . but the crimson, dirty mouth was grinning at the five men who looked up with haggard eyes—eyes which finally widened in gleams of recognition. Men half rose from their seats. Captain Bigelow was the first to give the apparition a name.

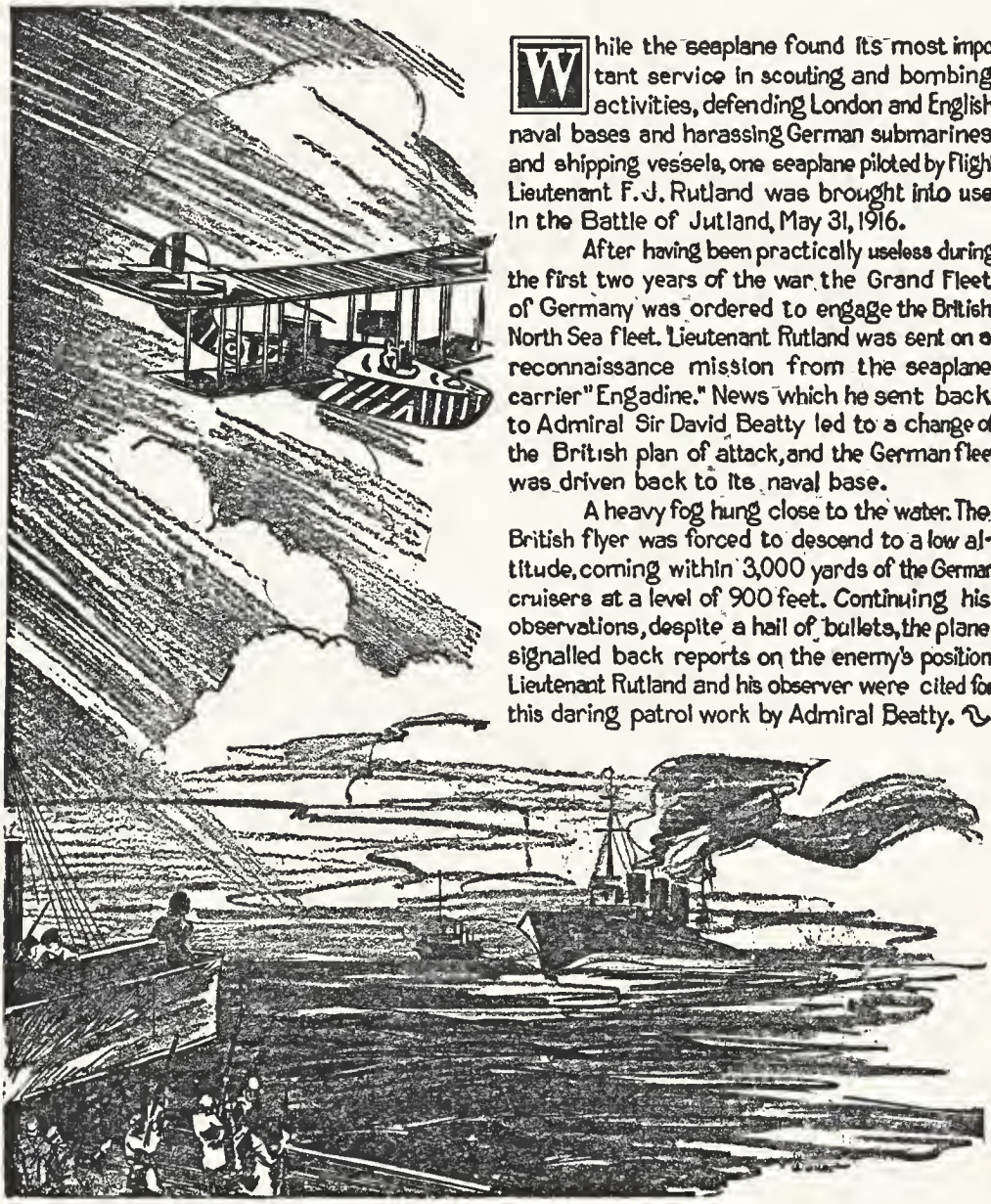
"Malachi Shafer! Where in God's name did you come from? We're glad to see you, *man!*"

And the last word did it. It seemed to take all the strength out of the man who was too old to fight. But as his knees buckled under him, letting him down, the Seventh heard him mutter:

"Any colt can snort in the morning, but it takes an old horse to snort at nig—"

They knew then, did the Seventh, that old Malachi had something in his make-up that none of them had, despite their youth. No longer would they make him fly alone.

PARTICIPATING *in a* GREAT NAVAL BATTLE



While the seaplane found its most important service in scouting and bombing activities, defending London and English naval bases and harassing German submarines and shipping vessels, one seaplane piloted by Flight Lieutenant F. J. Rutland was brought into use in the Battle of Jutland, May 31, 1916.

After having been practically useless during the first two years of the war the Grand Fleet of Germany was ordered to engage the British North Sea fleet. Lieutenant Rutland was sent on a reconnaissance mission from the seaplane carrier "Engadine." News which he sent back to Admiral Sir David Beatty led to a change of the British plan of attack, and the German fleet was driven back to its naval base.

A heavy fog hung close to the water. The British flyer was forced to descend to a low altitude, coming within 3,000 yards of the German cruisers at a level of 900 feet. Continuing his observations, despite a hail of bullets, the plane signalled back reports on the enemy's position. Lieutenant Rutland and his observer were cited for this daring patrol work by Admiral Beatty.

He Could Whip Any German That Flew and Whip Any Three of Them with His Fists—or So He Thought. When He Faced Berger He Learned That Even the Strongest Wings Know When to Fold.

CHALLENGE

SAM TERRY, one of the junior members of the squadron, as far as rank went, one of the veterans in point of service, sat over in one corner of the mess shack and watched proceedings with a brooding eye. He had a feeling in his bones that before the evening was over he would be doing it again, not because he wanted to, especially, but because he was made that way and couldn't help it.

He knew, had known from the very beginning, that he didn't like that *leutnant* Berger, with the aggressively close-cropped hair, the steel gray

Just as that fatal blow would have landed, Fokkers came in with eager guns.

A FIGHTING, SKY-HIGH NOVELETTE
By ARTHUR J. BURKS

eyes, and the lips that seemed always on the verge of twisting into a smile of contempt. And, he told himself angrily, it wasn't because the man was a German and he was supposed to dislike him because they were enemies. Nothing like that. It was just . . . well, he could tell by watching that Berger would probably do something before the evening was over for which Sam Terry himself, not *Leutnant* Berger, would be sorry.

It was one of those excessively polite affairs.

The Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron, on the Aisne, had had good hunting

that day. They had never been in finer fettle when they had flown away this morning. Fifteen of them had flown into Germany. They had tangled with Gerard Stumer's staffel four miles behind the lines. They had fought like fiends. So had the Germans. But reinforcements had dropped out of the skies for the Germans—and the Fourteenth had had to fight its way home.

At the lines most of the reinforcements of Stumer had called it a day. But there had been several hardy souls among the Germans who hadn't been satisfied. Believing that dogs with their tails between their legs were dogs that had been whipped and could be further abused, seven of Stumer's flyers had followed what there was left of the Fourteenth back to a spot of sky above their own tarmac. There Captain Penny, tired of running away, had signaled his bullies to turn on the enemy. As a result of that fight, four German officers now sat in the American mess-shack and ate American food.

THE Americans were excessively polite to them, perhaps out of consideration for the fact that the other three Germans who had been a bit too foolhardy, were somewhere out in the woods beyond the now dark tarmac, crushed and burned beyond human resemblance in the wreckage of their Fokkers. Of these four Germans, three had been slightly wounded. Their wounds had, of course, been dressed.

Leutnant Berger, however, had been captured without a scratch. He had landed on the field with the wings of his ship folded around his neck and smoke and flames rising from his motor housing, and with three Spads riding him into the ground. He'd submitted to capture with fine disdain, and without vouchsafing his captors so much as a look. And he had accepted a cigarette from the first pilot to reach him, with an air which had said plainly that he regarded that pilot as just one degree above a batman or a body servant.

Lieutenant Sam Terry had been that pilot, and Berger's calm assumption of superiority had galled him, had caused his gorge to rise with that old familiar feeling which always warned Sam Terry of stirring events in the wind.

Food had been eaten. Cigars, pipes and cigarettes were busy, and bottles and glasses clinked merrily. The four Germans were now the honored guests of the squadron, which wasn't too much to do for men for whom the war was ended.

Sam Terry stared and brooded. But for their uniforms one might have gathered, as the evening drew on and liquor mellowed friend and enemy alike, that the Germans were members of the Fourteenth.

"Hell," said Sam Terry to himself, "we treat 'em like human beings, when that Berger, to my knowledge, knocked down Hank Dowdy and Clance Perrin this morning — and didn't even give 'em a break for their lives!"

Still, it was the custom to feed the fallen enemy before sending him away to prison. The Fourteenth but followed the custom. The four Germans were names along the front, names with which to conjure. All four were aces. There was *Hauptmann* Dorfman, with seventeen Allied ships to his credit; *Oberleutnant* Kleinman with twelve; *Leutnant* Prinz with seven. Berger, Terry knew, had the biggest list of kills with twenty-one. Here, with the Fourteenth, sat four enemies who had slain fifty-seven Allied pilots.

And right now Captain Penny was rising to his feet to toast their captured enemies. He lifted his glass high.

"To our gallant guests," he said. "They have been sportsmanlike enemies. They fought good fights. It happens that the fortunes of war have placed them at our tables tonight, that

friend and enemy may make merry for a time; may forget the Hell which all of us know so well. For this night we must forget all that has gone before.

"Some of you, *Meine Herren,* know that some of us have knocked down men whom you loved. We all know that some of you have sent our friends west with planes wrapped around their necks, their bodies roasting in flames, riddled with bullets. But tonight we forget all that. Those things were the fortunes of war. We all came into this war expecting things like that to happen. We must regard it as a game, and merely realize that those who fell happened to lose. Drink up!"

Sam Terry rose with reluctance. His eyes were fixed on the lips of Jacob Berger. He noted that Berger looked around as he rose, glass in hand, and that his face was filled with poorly disguised contempt for his captors. But Berger drank — and spat! For a moment there was silence. Someone broke the silence with hysterical laughter. Sam Terry's eyes narrowed. The freckles on either side of his nose faded out a bit. His blue eyes blazed. His muscles went taut. His fists, out of sight below the table, clenched tensely. His teeth grated together audibly.

"I can feel it coming on me," Terry told himself, conscious that the eyes of his nearest wingmates were turned in his direction, that several of them were grinning and nudging one another.

Terry stood about five feet eight inches in his stocking feet. There was but one thing about him to distinguish him from a group of average Americans—and that was something he could no more help than he could fly to the moon.

Sam Terry, stocky, reasonably fast on his feet and with his head, simply could not take a dare!

At the moment, though, he kept control of himself. But his eyes played over Berger. Berger, he decided, weighed about a hundred and eighty pounds. Sam Terry weighed a hundred and fifty, all of it bone and muscle. Berger didn't seem to have any fat on him, either. Terry noticed a saber scar on his right cheek, relic of Heidelberg and the code of the duel perhaps. The man was, apparently, a Prussian military machine, whose vast contempt for any human being who was not a Prussian, he made little attempt to hide.

If the others noticed Berger's behavior, they affected not to. After the one burst of laughter the whole group sat down. Conversation became general as the drinks moved along the table. Friend and enemy mingled together with apparent good feeling. They talked of the fight of today and the fights of yesterday . . . and those who had taken part in them, against one another, compared notes with all the satisfaction of fighters who realize they have fought well. The other three Germans smiled easily, were perfect gentlemen. They smoked their cigarettes with gay good humor and banished from their eyes any disappointment which they must have felt when they considered prison camp for the rest of the war.

BUT Berger sat alone, aloof, eyes narrowed as he studied his captors, answering questions in monosyllables when he deigned to answer at all. He drank whenever the bottle passed his hand. He drank his liquor neatly, apparently without swallowing, and as the hours wore on, his skin, which seemed naturally to have a grayish pallor, as though he had spent years in prison, took on a fiery reddish tint.

Laughter filled the mess-shack, laughter which served to drown out the roaring of big guns to the north and east. Once the muttering stuttering of a pair of Gothas came through, out of the night from the north, together with the drumming of their Fokker escort planes. Friend and

enemy locked eyes as all understood and interpreted the sounds.

The Fourteenth wondered if it would be called out to the attack. Then the chattering of machine guns came through . . . and all hands knew that Allied ships were trying to fight off the night flying bombers. They harkened to the sounds which, after a few minutes, began to die away toward Germany. They heard, once, a terrific roar, which told them that at least one of the Gothas had been knocked down and that its cargo of bombs had let go. They tried to cover up the significant sounds by added laughter and shouted jests. But Berger sat like a figure in stone, listening to the dying-away drone of the German flight, the rat-tatting of the Allied machine guns which told the story of failure.

Jacob Berger banged his fist on the table, rose to his feet.

"What is the matter with our flyers?" he demanded of nobody in particular. "If Jacob Berger were with that escort you may rest assured that it would not have been driven off so easily. It is a sad day for Germany when we four may no longer fly with our gentlemen against the accursed Allies! We sit here and drink with our enemies. It is a foul custom! Are we men to stand for it? Where is our courage? There can never even be a semblance of friendship between us Germans and you.

"I drink to this: that it took three of you to drive Jacob Berger down, even when his wings were folding around his neck and his Fokker was in flames, and twelve of your mechanics had to surround him to make sure that he did not bite! Drink!"

But no glasses were lifted. Even the other three Germans made no move. Berger went on.

"Man for man," he said, "the Germans are capable of handling odds of three to one with ease, anywhere—in the sky, on the ground, with guns, knives or fists. . . ."

For a moment it seemed to Sam Terry that Berger looked directly at him. It was impossible, for Terry at least, to ignore even the semblance of a challenge. Several of his wingmates barked his name as he flung himself around the end of the table and marched to face Jacob Berger. His face was white, his fists tightly clenched at his side, his lips drawn back from his teeth as he spoke tensely.

"You big hunk of cheese!" he said clearly and distinctly. "You think you're God's gift to the Fatherland. I say you're a loud-mouthed bag of wind. For two cents, here and now, I'd shove your words down your throat!"

Berger looked at *Hauptmann* Dorfman. Dorfman looked questioningly at Captain Penny. Penny considered, then nodded his head. The Fourteenth whooped. Berger's face writhed in a tight grin.

"It will be," said Penny, "a fitting climax to a historic evening!"

CHAPTER II

GRIM COMBAT

THE Prussian officer was cold as ice. He shoved back his glass and bottle as though to clear decks for action. Sam Terry was across the table from him. Berger placed his left hand on the table top and vaulted over cleanly, as easily as though the table had been nothing. He landed on his feet without sound.

And something unusual had entered the mess-shack of the Fourteenth. This was no longer a semi-friendly gathering. It was distinctly unfriendly, like rival officers sitting about a council table, trying to decide on terms of surrender. Berger, hard as nails, half a head taller than Sam Terry, was Germany. Terry was the United States. He believed that his country could whip any two countries in the world and that if he couldn't whip any man in the world himself, could at least make him know that he had been in a fight. His legs were

slightly bowed, which gave a distinct roll to his walk.

He backed away slightly as Berger stood before him, hands at his sides. Berger looked about, as though wondering how to proceed, as to what the rules might be. Silence, tense with meaning, had entered the place—part and parcel of the Hell which raged along the Front out in the blackness. This thing was impossible, but here it was.

"Better strip off your blouse, Heinie!" snapped Sam Terry. Terry himself had dropped his blouse to the floor behind him and was stripping off his shirt.

"It will scarcely be necessary," replied Berger softly.

Anger flamed anew in the breast of Sam Terry.

"Then I shall be compelled to rip it off you!" he said.

Berger's lips writhed away from unusually white teeth. He said nothing.

There was something inevitable about the man.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then why do we wait?"

THERE was challenge again in the voice and manner of the stiffnecked Prussian. Sam Terry went into action. He slid forward like a striking rapier, his left hand to the fore, his right cocked ready at his waist. Berger, just as the left fist of Terry would have touched his nose, moved his head slightly and Terry missed clean! The right which he was shooting forward then, and could not stay, went harmlessly past the jaw of Jacob Berger. Berger's right smashed against Terry's ribs with terrific speed and weight, and Terry took the whole force of the wallop going in. He knew instantly then that he dealt with a man who knew more about the science of fist fighting than did Terry himself.

He heard his wingmates gasp as the wind went out of his body with a rush, leaving him weak, panting for breath. Berger charged, his brow corrugated with the tensity of his concentration. His left hand was forward, his right swinging at his belt. His left shot forward, went back again as he drew Terry slightly off balance and his right smashed to Terry's temple. Terry went down, all but turning a back somersault. Several of Terry's wingmates half rose from their seats. It was *Hauptmann* Dorfman who stopped them with a snapped word of command:

"Keep out! He asked for it!"

If it seemed strange to take orders from a German nobody noticed it, for Sam Terry, his lips bleeding, his eyes filled with the fire of battle, was scrambling back to his feet. Tottering a little, he fought off the charge of the German as best he could. He took many savage blows to the face and body as he lashed out again and again to the German's jaw—missing for the most part. But he kept his feet, weathering a storm of punches.

Terry's knees buckled as a fist grazed his jaw—a sure knockout punch if Berger had landed squarely. From a half squatting position Terry hurled himself in, under the fists of his opponent. But now his hands were open. They fastened in the blouse of the unrumpled German and yanked. The German's blouse, ripped and torn, came off in Terry's hands. He laughed then, laughed and yelled. At least if he lost the fight, he would have something to show for it. Now, reckless of consequences, because he didn't mind a licking so long as he did his best, Sam Terry moved in on Berger.

Fists drummed against his face and his torso, but now his own fists were flying, his wind was good, and the close cropped head of his enemy was jarred and shaking from the constant drumfire of his fists. Again he ducked under the blows of Berger. Again his hands were not fists, but claws. When he yanked free the German was

nude to the waist and Terry was yelling:

"Now you don't look so damned dignified, you clown! And before I'm through I'll whittle you down to my size!"

But Berger lost none of his dignity, even when nude to the waist. He was an efficient fighting machine. He crouched, moved in on Terry, his blue eyes boring into those of his antagonist. Terry smashed him on the nose. Berger spat blood, shook his head, and sent home lefts and rights that rattled on the ribs of Terry like machine gun bullets. Terry swayed like a limb in the wind, but he never ceased jeering at the efforts of his opponent. Berger was hard as iron. Germans, Jerry had discovered, were hard-headed, hard-handed, and not afraid of the sight of blood. This one did not seem to enjoy the fight nor to abhor it. It was just another job he had to do, the last fight, perhaps, he would have with an American in this war.

HE was making the most of it, and when his blows landed with pile-driver force Sam Terry knew something he hadn't suspected before; Jacob Berger had the Indian sign on him, and Berger meant not only to whip him, but to kill him with his fists, unless Terry's wingmates interfered to save him from punishment. And Terry, even if he had known himself doomed to die at the hands of this prisoner, wouldn't have asked for help had his life depended on it.

Instead of trying to avoid the fists of his enemy, he now waded directly into the fistic drumfire, giving out the best he knew. Berger knew how to use his weight. They clinched, now and again, and Berger hung on Terry. Terry wrestled with him, fought him hard at close quarters, and was moment by moment conscious of the fact that he was slowly but surely being beaten to a pulp. He dropped to one knee under a fierce drubbing of rights and lefts. Berger towered over him, fists drawn back for a finishing blow. Captain Dorfman shouted:

"Careful, Berger!"

Berger stepped back. Terry was furious. It was awful, to be saved by an enemy. He hurled himself forward from his knees, vowing not to take a backward step or to stop punching, moving forward, until something dropped. If that something were himself, well, there was blood on the face of Berger and on his chest, which the fists of Sam Terry had hammered to a beet red, to show Berger that at least he had been in a fight.

Berger was snarling as he fought, as though he had entirely forgotten where he was—that he was surrounded by enemies. His fists were bleeding, too; his savage blows had broken the skin across his knuckles, knuckles which had ripped and torn at the body and face of Sam Terry.

Terry went down. Someone began to count, while Berger stood back, scarcely breathing hard. Terry got up again, in the midst of silence that could have been felt, and flung himself forward. Berger must go down in his turn, or Terry would forever thereafter be a man in disgrace, he thought.

He closed in. He bounced and jerked under the sledgehammer blows of Berger, but he did manage to get in close enough for a single shot at the German's jaw. Berger dropped to his knees! Wild with excitement, Terry all but struck him in that position, and this time it was Penny who interposed.

"Take it easy, Terry!"

Berger was back on his feet. Now he threw to the winds all attempts at defense. He walked steadily in, throwing his blows with either hand, telegraphing his punches, letting them go with everything he had behind them. He drove Terry across the room by the sheer power of his attack, backed by thirty pounds advantage in weight. Terry had his back against the wall. Berger was holding

him there with his left hand, palm against his face, measuring him for the knockout. Only Terry saw it would not be a simple knockout, not a blow delivered from the side, straight to the button, but a straight right which might well crush his head against the hard wall of the building.

But the blow never landed. A tremendous roaring burst suddenly over the tarmac, and the whole scene changed as though by magic. The four Germans were all at once together. Berger had dropped Terry like a shot. Captain Penny rose to his feet, as did the others . . . and automatics appeared suddenly in several hands. Penny's voice rose, clarion-like, above the racket.

"It's an attempt to free the prisoners! Watch 'em. Terry, go to the door and call some members of the guard. Then you, Cortelyou," to another member of the Fourteenth, "will take charge of the detail that takes these prisoners to the rear. Don't lose them, as you value your own reputation! If they try to break away, don't hesitate to shoot or kill!"

Gone was the festivity which had prompted this queer gathering. Gone on the instant was any thought of a continuation of the fight between Berger and Terry. Outside ground crews were searching for the enemy with Lewis lead. The roaring of half a dozen planes blasted the field. Bullets tore at the roofs of hangars, ripped at the corners of the mess-shack. At the door, with the four Germans in the hands of guards, Berger turned to Terry. "Some day," he said grimly, "we shall meet again, war or no war!"

CHAPTER III

THE HIGH DARE

SAM TERRY, trembling with weariness, panting for breath, met the eyes of Jacob Berger. He was prevented from renewing the fight only by the bayonets of the guards who surrounded Berger and his wingmates. But he nodded his head.

"Wherever and whenever we meet, Berger," said Sam Terry, "I'll be glad to oblige you."

"I trust and believe that the time will be soon," retorted Berger.

Then Captain Penny snapped at Cortelyou, and the four Germans were instantly in the status of prisoners, with no rights at all, certainly none of speech. They straightened, waited quietly for the commands of their guards. Outside the enemy planes swooped over the field. The Fourteenth tried to tell their number by their sound.

"Twelve Fokkers," said Frank Parker, "and they're out for blood."

"Go out quickly," said Penny, who realized that if the lights were doused their prisoners might have a chance to make a break, and that if they were left on they might catch the eyes of the night flying enemy and bring literal storms of lead about their heads, "and circle the building to the right."

The four Germans were in a compact group, Jacob Berger in the remnants of a blouse quickly gathered up from the floor. The guard consisted of six men commanded by Lieutenant Cortelyou. The outfit would have to march five kilometers through the woods to Wing, to turn over their prisoners.

They circled the shack quickly, with the Fourteenth in attendance, heading for the woods until the fury of the air attack had died down. Terry hated to go, but he realized that he couldn't fight off the Germans singlehanded, from the ground, with nothing but his hands. Even against one German those hands had not served him as well as they might have done. Behind the mess-shack, several rods into the shelter of the woods, the outfit stopped. Captain Penny checked the prisoners, calling their names. All four answered. Then he bade Cortelyou make directly through

the woods toward Wing, and cautioned him again about shooting to kill if the prisoners tried to make a break for it.

"Don't you think, Captain," came the sneering voice of Berger "that your men would be safer against us, unarmed as we are, if they put their bayonet points directly against our backs and held them there all the way to your Wing Headquarters?"

Penny did not answer. Terry started forward.

"Let me get my hands on—" he began.

But Penny barred his way with arm flung wide across his chest.

"Cut it, fool!" he snapped. "Aren't you satisfied with one licking in an evening?"

"He couldn't have knocked me down, to stay."

"No, thanks to a flock of Fokkers, he didn't, but he could have, would have. You asked for what you were getting, and I for one fully intended to let you get it. Maybe some day you'll realize there are things that even you can't do."

TERRY snorted, but the blasting of many guns, the chattering of Spandaus and Lewises, drowned out the ribald sound. For a long moment the Fourteenth, after the prisoners and their guards had vanished into the blackness of the shell-blasted woods, stood there under cover, separated each from the other by several yards, and the abysmal darkness—so that one chance burst would not down them all, and listened to the strafe of their drome.

The Germans were out for blood. They must have realized by now that the Americans had found a way to get their prisoners to a place of safety, and were content to do all the damage to the drome they could, now that they were here. One of the hangars on the far end of the row burst into flames. Penny shouted:

"Damn their souls! There are two brand new Spads in that hangar!"

"Why the hell do we let them get away with it?" demanded Terry.

Penny shoved his face close to that of the man who could not take a dare.

"Because, fool, we haven't a chance of getting off the field while they have the advantage of position and altitude. Not one of us would get free even if they allowed us to start rolling toward the take-off."

"But they've got us pinned here like so many flies to a piece of blotting paper! Have we got to stand for it?"

"Unless you want to be a dead hero, you'd better conform."

"I know, but just the same—"

"Oh, shut up, Knockout Terry!" snapped Lieutenant Parker, a tall officer from Texas. "Haven't you jousted at enough windmills for one evening?"

"Well, I'll bet *I'd* get off the field!"

"If you have as much luck getting off the field as you had getting off that wall when Berger pinned you with his left palm!"

Terry faced his accuser, face shot forward aggressively.

"If you make another break like that I'll . . ."

But Penny interrupted.

"They're calling it a night. They're forming to the northeast for the run home. Let's give 'em a ride, gents. To your ships. You'll have to take off cold."

With a shout the Fourteenth, ten fliers strong, charged across the black tarmac, led by Penny who shouted for greaseballs. Doors were being hurled open, crates hauled onto the tarmac. Extra greaseballs were fighting the hangar fire at the end of the field to keep the fire from spreading to the other hangars. The exodus of ships had started before Penny's command, in order to make sure that if all the hangars went the planes would be saved.

As the Fourteenth picked out their ships, a single Fokker dived like a

shot out of the darkness, its Spandaus flaming. It attacked the men who fought the flames with burst after burst of hot lead. A half dozen men dropped in their tracks. Several of them writhed, several merely fell and did not move. One man, close to the flames, jumped forward like a wounded deer. But he didn't feel them. He'd taken a burst squarely in the back. The drive of it had all but hurled him straight into the flames.

Sam Terry, the excitement bringing back the strength that Berger had knocked out of him, cursed like a maniac as he flung his leg over the side of his cockpit. His eyes had picked out the insignia on the Fokker, and then and there he resolved to find that German if it took all night, and pay him off for the dead ground men at the edge of the fire.

Terry glanced at the Spad next beyond him on the apron, to see a figure sprawled in the pit, head against the crashpad. He had seen too many dead men not to know that the last dive of that single Fokker had written finis to the career of Frank Parker. But among the pilots he was the only casualty.

One by one, the Spads, looking like bats in the darkness—bats which breathed fire and the stink of gasoline—rolled down the black field. Their tails were off quickly and then, one after the other, they jumped from the field.

Lieutenant Shively was the next victim. He was two hundred feet off the field, starting into a climbing turn, when the lone German got him, got him at the bottom of a dive that was bullet fast, and blasted the life out of him through the belly of his cockpit. Even as one wing of Shively's Spad dropped, starting down under full power, the German switched to the Spad's motor and let go a long burst. Shively went into the woods in flames.

Sam Terry, just leaving the field, but with his eyes straining on the night sky to make sure that he didn't follow Shively, fancied he could hear again the derisive comments of Jacob Berger on the comparative merits of German and American fliers and fighters. Terry lifted his nose at the sky. He saw Shively's plane crash in and explode, scattering gasoline soaked bits of fabric through the woods, giving the ground crew some extra work to prevent the sure spread of the fire.

The other Spads were getting off. The lone German, now, was rapidly losing his advantage as the Spads got away. Sam Terry thought he saw the exhaust flames of the lone enemy, fading away to the northeast, and leveled off at a bare thousand feet to give chase. Penny would give him hell for failing to wait for the others, but he, Sam Terry, could take care of himself, and he had promised himself that he would handle the German.

He meant to keep his promise, remembering the silent forms back there on the tarmac.

HIS Hisso roared as he let her full out. He tripped his Vickers to make sure they were in working order. Bullets bored through the propeller arc in a satisfying snarl of grim potency. Sam Terry settled himself in his pit. He looked back to see the rest of the Fourteenth rendezvousing at about four thousand feet. Their red exhausts set them out against the darkness. He saw them set a course, Captain Penny leading, and knew that they concentrated on the main body of the German flight.

The lone German, however, was Terry's meat. He had done the most damage. Penny might reprimand him for going it alone, but Terry would be forgiven if he could report that he had brought down the German who had killed so many of their ground men. He shrugged. Let Penny do as he liked.

His Hisso roared sweetly. His plane rose and fell on the winds of the cool night. Over ahead and be-

yond him were the noises and the night lights of the fighting Front, where men died in the glare of suddenly blooming starshells. None of that for Sam Terry, who belonged to the brood of eagles.

Casting Berger from his mind, but with a mental promise to himself that no man, not even Berger, would dare him to combat in the future and not be satisfied, Sam Terry set his course on the exhaust flames of the lone German, who had now climbed to all of ten thousand feet, and let her go. The lines, with all their hellish lights —the bursting of bombs and shells, the flaring of starshells, the explosions of high speed projectiles falling on the quivering bodies of the Allies—were coming toward him with the speed of an express train. In a minute or two he would be in among the archies, which would try to knock him out of the sky.

Instead of climbing to get above them, Sam Terry gritted his teeth.

"To Hell with 'em!" he snapped into the slipstream. "I can go through the thickest of 'em and come out with all my clothes still pressed!"

The archies which hadn't yet opened on him were a challenge, too, part of Germany's challenge to the Allies, and therefore a direct challenge to Sam Terry himself.

When they opened he shoved the nose of his crate downward, eyes glued to spots of blackness below, watching for lights which would guide him to the gunners of the anti-aircraft guns. And when his altimeter told him he was under five hundred feet from the ground, he let go with his Vickers. He held the trips down while he sliced into the night like a falling broadaxe. Streams of bullets and tracer showed him where his bursts were going. If he hit anything he did not know. He did know, however, that many of the lights below him were instantly snuffed out and he could imagine men in grey, their close cropped heads topped by *pickel-haube* helmets, falling in windrows beside their guns.

"That will teach you!" he bellowed, zooming for the heights again, when the lines had been passed, his eyes fixed on the flames from the exhausts of the one man he had selected for his attention tonight.

CHAPTER IV

WORDLESS PROMISE

NOW deep in German held skies, Sam Terry took a bit of stock of himself. Maybe he was a fool not to take a dare, but Berger, well, Berger was a prisoner, and Sam Terry was a free flying soul, wasn't he, here in the night skies of Germany? Certainly! That meant something. Reason told Sam that he couldn't whip the entire world, nor even that part of it represented by Imperial German Air, but he couldn't be blamed for trying if the opportunity offered, could he? People would remember him as well for trying as for backing off. He wouldn't trade his way of doing things with anybody. Whenever a guy started something with Sam Terry, he got action, and at once.

That's why Sam Terry had a broken nose that hadn't been set straight. It had happened in a logging camp. A burly lumberjack had boasted that he could whip any man in the world his own weight, or under or over. It had been like waving a red flag at a bull as far as Sam Terry was concerned. Sam had called him hard. Sam had been knocked down, and the lumberjack had not only hammered his head against the floor, but he had done it by grasping his ears, and when Sam Terry had been unconscious the lumberjack had added insult to injury by smashing his nose with a savage downward driven right fist.

Of course Sam Terry hadn't stopped there. He'd tackled the lumberjack every day after that until the fellow, despairing of ever keeping the smaller

man off him, even though he whipped him every time they met, had been forced by the jeers of his mates to quit and go to another camp. Only the war had kept Sam Terry from following him, and in the back of his mind was the idea that if he lived through the war he'd find that lumberjack and beat his head off.

He felt exactly that way now. Belligerently he searched the skies for the shapes of other German planes, but all he saw was the Fokker which he had followed from his own drome. It was closer now as though the enemy had slowed down to see what it was that trailed him. All about, above and below Terry, was enemy sky and enemy land. Every man's hand, here, was against the Allies. It puffed Sam up, just to think about it.

"I'm here, right in their midst, and what the Hell are they going to do about it?" he asked himself. "Maybe I'm foolish for leaving the rest of the bunch to fight their own battles, but they're old enough to take care of themselves. Besides, they can whip anything that flies, even if they are outnumbered three to one."

He straightened in his pit, staring to the front. He could no longer see the exhaust fires of the enemy. Probably the fellow had dived down for a landing. But no, he saw the Fokker's wings against the moon for a moment.

The German was coming back to see what was trailing him!

Sam Terry gritted his teeth. His eyes narrowed. His hands went to his trips. He looked back once, gauging the distance to his own lines. Not that Sam Terry expected to have to fight his way home, certainly not before the attack of any lone night hawk, but just to make sure that he knew where the Front was.

His Vickers were in working order. There was nothing left to be desired, save speedy contact with the German who dared to believe he had a chance with a guy who refused to be whipped. The nerve of the blighter! It was a personal affront. Sam Terry looked into the southwest, where his wingmates were rapidly overhauling the German flight which had attempted to free the four German prisoners, and nodded to himself. His friends could get along all right without him. And it was fitting that he do battle by himself, since he had promised himself he would.

The Fokker came on with a rush. It came headon with its Spandaus raging. And Sam Terry nosed up, giving his Hisso all she could stand. He climbed out of line of sights, peering through his wings to see that the enemy climbed after him. He leveled off at eight thousand feet and was ready for action. That height, he told himself, gave his enemy further to fall.

Now he turned his nose on the other and barged in.

THE German wasn't hesitating. His Spandaus were flaming. Terry could tell that bullets were eating into his wings. He rolled out of line of sights, watched the German whip past him. Then Terry was rising in a climbing turn to the left, a wingbuckling turn that made his Spad's structure groan and shriek with the strain. Terry leveled off. The Fokker was slightly below him, to his left. He ruddered around, then set his Vickers flaming, aiming at a white splotch in the midst of the black which he judged to be the face of his enemy.

The Fokker rolled away from him, showing its broad belly for a split second or two, and Terry let loose another burst at the Fokker's bottom. The Fokker seemed to shudder. It rocked its wings wildly as the pilot fought to bring it out of what promised to be a fatal spin into the ground. And then, Terry didn't know how it happened, but the German, with effortless ease, had jumped over him, reversed, and was sitting on his tail.

Bullets hummed and snapped past his ears as the German took full advantage of his opportunities. Bullets to the right and to the left. If they came in the middle . . .

Wildly Sam Terry rolled out, and his lips moved as he spoke blasphemously into the slipstream.

"Why you cheese-eating, slimy, buzzard! Before I get through with you you'll wish you were still teaching school in Stolpenburg."

The bullets were not on him for a moment, and he flung himself about the sky for a few seconds to make sure that the German had no target on which to fasten. Then he leveled, darted in and his Vickers spluttered balefully, feeding forth bullets as fast as the mechanism of motor and guns would spew them out.

The Fokker took a burst in the side. Terry saw the German throw up his hands and sink into the pit. The Fokker flew wildly on for a moment then started spinning down under full power. Terry, never sure that it wasn't a trick to escape rode down with him through a mile of space, watching, waiting. But no head showed above the cockpit coaming. If the flier were faking it, it was up to Terry to get him. If he were dead a few bullets wouldn't kill him any deader . . .

TERRY cut in his guns when the nose of his crate was full on the cockpit of the enemy. His Vickers chattered shrilly. The Fokker kept on spinning. It fell shrieking, as of a lost soul falling into Purgatory, rose to a high crescendo; the song of dying ships. Terry followed the Fokker until he knew that if he followed another hundred feet he would lose his wings on the pull-out.

Then he came out gradually while the Fokker kept on falling. Terry followed the ship down in lazy spirals, keeping a careful watch on the sky to make sure that he wasn't surprised from above or below—and saw the Fokker go in and blossom into sullen black smoke and orange flame.

Terry thumbed his nose at the wreck below.

"It should teach you that you should have let well enough alone, that you should have gone on home instead of getting curious!"

Terry was in the habit of talking like this so his wingmates could hear, and was never conscious how perilously close his talk came to sheer boasting, nor that it was the boasting of others which always called for a retort from him. A retort that invariably ended in blows. Sometimes he won outright, sometimes the victory was long in coming, but in the end, give him time—Terry told himself—and he would whip the best man with his fists that walked, or shoot down the best flier that flew.

Well, it was daylight now and time now to see how his wingmates were getting along. He could see the sky-ful of planes to the south, where the Fourteenth were blasting away at the Germans they had followed. And Terry could see other planes coming out of Germany to the assistance of their squarehead compatriots.

"They're certainly going to make sure!" muttered Terry. "It's about time I gave the boys a hand!"

The calm cocksureness of it did not faze him, nor was he even conscious of it. He believed in himself to the limit. That's why he now tooled his Spad toward the fight, confident that when he arrived on the scene it would be to turn the tide of battle in favor of his friends. As he roared into the south, now and again studying the sky to make sure he wouldn't be surprised, he rose in a series of zooms to get above the main conflict. He saw that other Germans were doing the same thing, but they, he told himself, would never think to make full use of a height advantage that he would.

Just before he reached the fight, now two thousand feet below him, he could tell by the shape of it that

Captain Penny was forming his eagles for the flight home.

"Now," thought Terry, "I wouldn't do that. I'd smack into 'em, even if they outnumbered me and I'd blast the livin' Hell out of 'em! I'd make *them* scoot home!"

He saw planes go spinning down the sky, some with broken wings, some wreathed in smoke and flames, but whether the fallen were Spads or Fokkers he could not tell. Probably both, only if Terry had been there from the beginning, he knew that none of the Spads would have been his!

The Spads were going home, pursued by a round dozen Fokkers, maybe with an Albatross scattered among them here and there. Terry was above and behind the Germans, whose Spandaus were giving the Fourteenth no rest at all. And Terry could count the Fourteenth. There were six of them left, seven counting himself, of the ten who had gone out. The Fokkers were driving six of them home. It seemed to Terry that he was doing some driving himself, but until the Germans knew it it did him no good. He tilted his nose over, let his Hisso scream her best, and slanted down under full power aiming at the center of the German squadron.

He dropped like the Hammer of Thor. His Vickers started screaming the second he came in range. He yawed right and left to cover as many of the enemy ships as he could. Wildly their pilots looked back, which gave the Americans split seconds in which to increase their lead over the enemy, to see what manner of danger descended on them from the skies. And then Sam Terry was in among them, trying to fight them all, firing a burst at this one, then at that one and shouting like a fool when one went down in the first second of firing.

Terry wasn't hesitating. It would be smarter to strike and get away without being touched than to stay and take any bullets. He smashed on through, confident that he had really helped his wingmates, and trailed them home—to find Captain Penny grimly awaiting him in the field at the edge of the apron.

CHAPTER V

EVENTFUL SHADOWS

SAM TERRY taxied to the apron and jumped blithely from his Spad, strode across the tarmac to face the skipper. His face was wreathed in smiles.

"Well, Skipper," he said, "that German I tailed asked for it and he got it!"

Penny's voice was cold as ice as he answered.

"Just what the devil do you mean, leaving the flight like that? Do you realize that if you had stayed with us, the two who went down might have been saved? You may, for all you know, be guilty of the killing of two of your wingmates."

Sam Terry shook his head.

"I don't believe that. If they were slated to go, they were slated to go, that's all. Of course if I had been there I might have staved it off for a few moments, no more. And that German; what gall he had to flip his tail in my face the way he did! And then, when he could have gone down to a landing, and a nice bed, he had the nerve to come back to see what I was doing, and he got exactly what he had coming to him!"

"Terry, you're a fool! The whole squadron regards you as an ape who throws himself into anything and everything, following the wind to every fancied insult, taking tall chances because you're afraid not to take them, because you're afraid of what your wingmates will think of you, as you probably call it, back down. That isn't courage. That's utter nonsense."

"But I got the German who blasted several of our men!"

"Which doesn't relieve you of the duty you owe to your wingmates! If

we didn't need all our men I'd ground you—for good."

"But," said Terry, grinning, "you *do* need all of us!"

Penny's lips tightened.

"If that's a dare," he said, "I'm liable to ground you in spite of Hell and highwater."

Terry grinned again.

"But you've just given me Hell because I won't take a dare! You have to be consistent, don't you?"

Penny swore. He turned and led the way to the operations shack, bidding Terry follow to make out his combat report. On the way they passed the rest of the squadron, standing at the edge of the shadowed tarmac, watching the sky to the east, talking in low tones. Terry could feel the antagonism drift out from them, like an emanation from some dank swamp. He couldn't understand it.

If all the rest of them refused to take dares, as he did, the Fourteenth would become the greatest flying group in the sector. They had apparently borrowed something from the Germans—cool, calm method, and it made, according to Terry's idea, the whole outfit a bunch of machines. Machines were all right in their places, but Terry liked to work on impulse, to get the most he could out of surprise—and there were always surprises when one called somebody's bluff. Sometimes the surprise was on the one who called, but that only added zest to the business at hand.

TERRY followed the raging skipper into the operations building. The skipper tossed a paper at him, bade him write it out. Terry sat down and wrote rapidly. He forebore to put any personal observations into his report, knowing from past experiences that all his superiors wanted were the mere facts of the case. He hadn't got the identification of the plane he had shot down, but he described it as best he could, realizing when he had finished that he could never have the *descendu* confirmed.

It was right then that the telephone rang. Penny grabbed up the receiver, looking at Terry as he listened. Terry's eyes held on those of his commander. The skipper's face went white. He licked his lips with a dry tongue. His eyes, on Terry, narrowed ominously. He clicked up the receiver, spoke to Terry.

"That was from Wing," he said, "and you're going to get your wish sooner than you expected. Maybe you didn't expect it?"

Terry's eyes widened.

"Just what are you driving at?"

"Berger!"

"You mean?"

"Exactly. Cortelyou lost him. He reported to Wing with the other three prisoners, but Berger got clean away. Wing has stripped the sidearms from the guards and placed Cortelyou under arrest in quarters. He'll be back here soon to give us his story. They'll court-martial him."

Terry grinned.

"Berger won't get through the lines," he said. "He'll be picked up sure. I'm afraid it's only a rest."

Penny stared at Terry a long moment.

"You'd better sleep in another hutment tonight, Terry," he said. "For I saw murder in the eyes of Berger when he looked at you as he was led away. He may come back through here for an accounting."

"Then," said Terry grimly, "I won't quit my hutment."

"It's a command, Terry," snapped Penny.

Terry shrugged. Orders were orders. Even Terry had to obey them. At that moment the door opened and Cortelyou came in. He wore a hangdog expression and shrugged as the eyes of Penny fastened on him.

"I couldn't help it," he said. "I don't even know when he ducked out. We were going through the woods. We came to a clearing and I counted noses. Berger was gone. Nobody

could tell me when or where he slipped away. But just before I missed him I had to call him down for talking. He was commenting on the unmitigated gall of Terry here, who had the nerve to take issue with him on the relative merit of Germans and other people. He's got a grudge against Terry that he expects to wipe out if ever the time comes."

Terry grinned.

"I'll be ready," he said, "and I don't like the idea of running away from this guy to another hutment, Skipper."

"Like it or not," said Penny, "you'll do as you're told."

Then Penny waved Terry out of the shack and signaled Cortelyou to sit down and give him the details. Terry went. As he crossed the tarmac he was remembering how Berger had held him, as though he had been a baby, against the wall of the mess-shack to batter his head with a straight right that would have brained him if the Fokkers hadn't come.

The Germans, then, realizing they had a chance, had dashed together for a concerted break, which had only been prevented by the automatics of the Fourteenth. He knew Berger wouldn't forget. His eyes searched the black wall of woods which surrounded the tarmac. Out there somewhere right now, he reasoned, Berger was stalking, planning on how to get back through the Allied lines to his own people. Berger, for all Terry knew, might be watching him this very minute. Berger was vengeful. Terry, too, had seen murder in his eyes earlier in the night. Berger looked like a man who paid his debts.

Terry shivered, and it wasn't with the cold. For all he knew Berger might be right here now, skulking in the shadows of shacks and hangars, waiting for a chance to steal a plane and get away, or to get a last crack at Terry himself. Terry had stung his egotism, and he felt that Berger was like the elephant which never forgets.

He strode across the tarmac to his own hutment, opened the door and peered in. For a moment he fully expected Berger to jump on him from the darkness, and closed his hands into capable fists to receive the onslaught. But nothing happened. He listened carefully for breathing, but heard none. Berger, he reasoned, would probably give this place a wide berth after all. He entered the hutment, gathered up what he would need for his personal policing, and walked down the line to a vacant hutment, which had been occupied by one of the fliers who hadn't come back from tonight's flight. He entered, locked the door, and was soon asleep. He slept like a baby.

If he dreamed it did not plague him. He did not toss and tumble in his sleep. He had nothing on his conscience. He had got by with Penny without too much trouble. And as for what his wingmates thought of him —to Hell with 'em!

THE orderly wakened him next morning, just as the first Spad started ticking over on the deadline.

"The Captain's compliments, sir, and the lieutenant is to go to the office immediately."

Terry dressed at once, strode through the door. On the way to the office he saw Penny, and the skipper was standing at the open door of Terry's hutment.

"Come here, Terry," he snapped, "and have a look."

Terry looked in at the door. There were cigarette butts, cigarettes of German make, scattered all over the floor about a chair near his cot. There was no mistaking their meaning. There, for several hours, someone had waited for Terry to come back, and it didn't take a detective to comprehend who it had been. The German cigarettes told the story. Berger had come here, discovered the location of Terry's hutment in some fashion and

waited to give Terry whatever he had in mind to give him.

He must at last have decided that Terry wasn't coming, or that it was time for him to go if he were to have a chance to get through the lines. He gritted his teeth as his eyes met those of Penny.

"If I ever get another crack at that buzzard," he said, "I'll take him apart. Who does he think he is to come right into the midst of the Fourteenth, as though we were a bunch of babies? It's time he was taught that he can't monkey with the buzz-saw. If ever I get a chance."

"You may get it, Terry," said Penny grimly. "Have a look at this! I found it fastened to the door of the operations shack this morning. This Berger is good. Not one of the sentries even heard or saw him."

Penny tossed a piece of crumpled paper to Sam Terry. Terry opened it and read:

Gentlemen of the Fourteenth:

You should exercise more care in the selcction of sentinels. They have an unfortunate tendency to sleep on post. For that offense they are shot in Germany. I could have entered your camp tonight with a squadron of Fokkers and your sentries wouldn't have heard them. Your guards and their officers were a bunch of dunderheads who couldn't even count. It was child's play to escape them.

If one of you were in the hands of German guards, I assure you that you would not have escaped. Bullets would have got you before you could have run ten yards. But I demean myself by taking you seriously, when you are all such children—especially the man who could be so easily goaded into losing control of himself. Of all of you, he was the only one who knew that his life was saved by the arrival of our planes. I should have killed him with a blow of my fist. But now it will be infinitely more satisfactory. I shall make it my business, once I am through the lines—and none of you would doubt my ability to get back, I'm sure—to meet this cocky fool in the air and show him how little he knows. Berger.

Terry raised his eyes from the piece of paper. He was consumed by fury. All he could say was:

"The bigheaded buzzard! The bigheaded buzzard! I'll yank his arm out by the roots and beat his head off with the bloody end of it!"

CHAPTER VI

THE MEETING

IT was a tense group that gathered at the edge of the apron for the morning patrol. The Fourteenth had lost too many men at the hands of Gerard Stumer's *flugstaffel* to be careless about it. And every member of the squadron knew, too, that Jacob Berger, the killer, had escaped. No word had come from anywhere of his capture. There was a chance, of course, that he was still skulking in the woods on the Allied side of the lines and would be picked up before the day was over, even while the Fourteenth was out on its morning flight. But few of Terry's wingmates believed that. And if Berger got back there would be Hell to pay.

He would tell of the fight in the mess-shack, making it sound as badly as possible. To the Germans he would make it seem that the Fourteenth had been unduly energetic in hectoring prisoners, though none of the Fourteenth had had any such thought. The fight between Berger and Terry had been just that—a fight between two men. But it would be made to sound terrible, as badly as though the Germans had been deliberately mistreated while prisoners of war.

The Germans, egged on by Berger, would be formidable antagonists. They were formidable enough already, but after the story Berger told on his return, if he did . . . He could be trusted to muster all the anger of his fellows against the Fourteenth. And that he and Terry would meet in the sky was inevitable. Terry didn't mind. What the Hell? He could whip any part of Berger, give him time. But would Berger give him time, asked Terry's wingmates?

They had little patience with Terry this morning. They knew he had gone away by himself last night, appeasing his ego by knocking down a lone Ger-

man flier. There were several of them who even doubted he had done as much, and the fact that Terry knocked down one of his wingmates who expressed doubt didn't change matters. If ever the Fourteenth needed teamwork to the Nth degree they needed it now. They all knew that Sam Terry was not one to conform.

It simply wasn't in him. He could fly formation and fight in formation with the best of them; but let an enemy do anything, however slight, that he could regard as a belittling of himself, and teamwork went by the board while Terry tried his level best to teach the enemy the error of his ways. He was that way, always had been, probably always would be.

So they looked at him dubiously as they crawled into their crates. Orders this morning called for a simple patrol behind the lines, to keep an eye out for troop movements, to enter into combat only if pressed, and to get back with information. The orders stated that any enemy balloons spotting for artillery far behind the lines were to be put out of commission. Beyond that— The rest was in the lap of the gods. A simple patrol might or might not be simple.

Terry strode to his crate and crawled in. Everything seemed to be in working order. He was set to go. It came to him as he fiddled with the instruments on his dash that this wasn't a formation flight, really, but a solo flight, in which he went forth alone to do battle with Jacob Berger. He hadn't the slightest doubt of the outcome, for it wasn't in him to question his own capabilities.

If he met Berger he would down the German buzzard! Then he would come back and tell his wingmates what happened to Germans who had the gall to challenge American fliers.

Down at the right of the line Captain Penny had his right hand raised. Eight crates, two of them flown by replacements which had come up during the night, were tugging at their chocks. At Penny's signal greaseballs pulled the chocks. Penny's hand came down and the eight Spads started rolling, the song of their Hissos a rising tide of sound in the early morning. Some of the fliers showed the strain of the night just passed, and there were several whose nervousness boded ill for the fortunes of the Fourteenth. But these would steady when the formation was off the ground and actually headed for the Front.

The rendezvous was for seven thousand feet and Captain Penny went up with a rush and a whistling of wind through his wires. He leveled off after a series of rushing climbing turns, and waited for his men to fall into position behind him. Sam Terry was on the left rear of the V. He was singing to himself. Once more the Fourteenth would go out to show German Air what Americans were made of. They had attacked the field last night, and that was a challenge that couldn't be ignored. They had killed six greaseballs. Six of them must die to pay for those lives. Sam Terry would, he promised himself, get as many of those six as was humanly possible.

If he thought of failing to come back himself, he never admitted it to anyone, not even to Sam Terry.

THE wings of the eight Spads rose and fell with the winds which came out of the north. Their left wings rose on the updrafts of air, then lowered to level as hands on the sticks and feet on the rudderbars corrected. The skies of Germany rushed to meet them as they approached the lines. The archies were already probing for them. Penny lifted his nose, went on up to ten thousand with the Fourteenth trailing him. The archies were bursting up there, but by zig-zagging, guessing at the locations of the next shots, they had every chance of getting through without mishap.

The wings rocked as the archies burst and flowered. The Fourteenth

did not waver or hesitate. With Hissos full out they slammed on into German skies. And now they drew closer and closer together, as though for greater security in contact. They headed straight in. They knew that infantry sniped at them, for now and again holes appeared in their wings. But they neither paused nor looked down.

The eyes of them all, especially those of Captain Penny, searched the skies for the wings of the enemy. They would be out in force this morning, especially if Berger had gotten back with his story. Terry was itching for another chance at the grim-featured German. He had been one of the three who had followed Berger down when the fellow had been captured, and there were certain characteristics of his flying which Terry remembered. He knew that he would recognize the man if he ever saw him again, on the ground or in the air.

A SQUADRON of Fokkers suddenly dived out of the sun, smashing down to the attack. Penny signaled for the Fourteenth to form for battle. But right at the moment when it seemed the Fokkers would open fire with their Spandaus, the whole German flight veered off, refusing the issue. Terry shouted into the slipstream:

"I guess they know who we are! I guess they know when to let well enough alone!"

But he felt the increasing tension among his wingmates. Those Fokkers hadn't been from Stumer's *Flugstaffel.* What did it mean? Terry wasn't one to do a great deal of guessing at anything. If, as he began to suspect when flight after flight of German planes veered off and let them alone, word had gone forth from the Stumer *staffel* that the Fourteenth were to be saved for the tender mercies of Stumer's men alone, all well and good. That was a challenge which was to Sam Terry like a red flag to a bull.

He saw Penny look over his flight as though trying to make up his mind about something, guessed that Penny had figured out why fliers who didn't belong to Stumer's *staffel* were letting them severely alone, and was expecting plenty of trouble. Penny hesitated as though to turn back, or to swerve to the right or left and parallel the lines. Sam Terry's heart dropped into his boots. Hell's sweet bells! was Penny going to allow a mere wordless threat to make him get the wind up? Of course Stumer's mob outnumbered them three to one, but Terry didn't care if the odds were even greater.

He could handle his share of Germans, with Jacob Berger thrown in, and he felt reasonably sure that his wingmates could do likewise. Of course they might make mistakes that Terry would not make, but for their capabilities they were not half bad. Certainly they were a little better than the average, and far better than any Germans.

The Fourteenth, as Penny made up his mind, went on. Now they flew with care, watching every movement of wings against the sky, their own and those of the enemy. They were taking no chances. One by one, with the utmost attention to details, the members of the Fourteenth cleared its Vickers, made sure they were ready for action.

They were now five kilometers behind the lines, flying at an elevation of twelve thousand feet. Ahead were banks of cumulus clouds.

"It would be like Berger's men to wait and jump on us out of the clouds," thought Terry. "Americans would come out into the open and take their chances."

So, too, it seemed, would the Germans, for scarcely had Terry voiced the thought into the slipstream than the cumulus vomited Fokkers galore. They came roaring out of the clouds at top speed, swinging into offensive formation even as they came. Terry saw the pencils of tracer smoke at their spinner caps, knew that the Ger-

mans were out for blood. This would be a desperate fight to a finish, with no quarter asked or given.

Terry counted the planes. There were twenty-four of them. Ten came straight on, charging directly at the center of the Fourteenth's formation, while to right and left went two flights of six planes each. Their purpose plain: to take the Fourteenth from front and flanks at the same time. Their cross-fire would thus be deadly. Terry knew exactly how he, in Penny's place, would combat that. He would dive right in and blast Hell out of every German that came within his ringsights. To Hell with the others, they couldn't shoot straight anyhow, and after he'd done his job with the immediately adjacent flyers, he would turn on the others and convince them that Germans couldn't down Americans even from the flanks or the rear.

Vickers began to flame.

Spandaus chattered their endless challenge of death. Penny signaled that it was every man for himself. With a whoop of joy Sam Terry banked away to the left until free of his friends, and then hurled himself straight at the six-plane formation that was slanting in from the side. He went with the stick between his knees and his eyes glued to his ringsights, his Vickers chanting their song of impending destruction.

A Fokker tried to edge away, to roll out of his line of sights, but expecting the Fourteenth to stay together, the Fokkers on the left flank were bunched and the flyer dared not roll too far without endangering himself and his fellows by a potential collision. It was easy for Sam Terry to yaw just enough to bring the fellow back into line.

He let go a long burst when he saw the belly of the Fokker dead in his sights. He saw the pencils of his tracer end at the plane's underside, saw the Fokker hesitate, while its fellows banked wildly to right and left, but kept coming on, to escape the Fokker which was already going wild with a dead hand at the stick.

Terry shouted with glee as he made his first kill, saw the Fokker drop a wing and start screaming down the sky toward the far black soil held by Germany. He kept on going, straight for the five remaining planes. At that moment a single ship swooped over him, blasting his cockpit coaming. It banked just to his right and he saw the face of Jacob Berger, stern, expressionless.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHALLENGE ANSWERED

INSTANTLY all thought of anything outside himself and Jacob Berger vanished from the mind of Sam Terry. Here was proof that the grim German flyer had made his escape from the Allied lines and had rejoined his own. Berger had become again the sure methodical killer. That he had recognized Sam Terry, Terry knew beyond a shadow of doubt, and his stream of bullets, directed at Terry's cockpit, proved that again he was throwing down the gauge of battle to the man he would have killed last night if his own mates had not come to put an end to the fist fight.

The Germans must be smarting under the indignity of having lost three of their flyers to the Americans. Today they would wipe out any fancied insult by smashing the Americans from the skies if they could.

Terry swarmed after the German with his Vickers blazing. His lips twisted with self-disgust as he knew he had opened too soon and while still not in position to make a direct hit on the Fokker of the enemy. Berger was a sure, graceful flyer. His hands on the trips of his guns were the hands of a master. Not even Terry could beat him at flying and gunnery. But of one thing Terry was certain: he could out-game and out-smart the man, give him time enough. By sheer tenacity, as long as he could evade the rushes and the bursts of lead from

Berger's Spandaus, he could, in the end, force the German to quit, or slay him.

Berger dived, came up under Terry, even as Terry was banking away, expecting the lunge for the belly. Bullets hammered at his fuselage, and he could feel his Spad shudder and moan under the terrific impact of the countless slugs. And to his nostrils came the odor of smoke. He looked back. Berger was using incendiaries to make sure of his prey, and the whole rear of Terry's fuselage was smoking.

Terry looked down, then stared at the lines, impossibly far away. If he could reach them, knowing as he did that he must go down or roast, he might have a chance for his life. He cut out of the fight, and instantly Berger was on him like a leech. There was one thing about the fire which burned away at Terry's crate—the wind of his passage blew it away from him. But what of the moment when his tail surfaces were useless and he could no longer control his ship?

Terry decided on desperate measures. He aimed his nose at the approximate location of the lines and put her down on a long glide under full power. Berger clung to him. When Berger was about to open fire, Terry dared to roll to the right. But he leveled again immediately afterward, treasuring the seconds of time and the yards of sky as though they had been pearls beyond price.

Only a few kilometers to the lines, but they might have been light years of space. Terry had to reach them. Berger had got back from the Allied lines, but he hadn't done it with the whole Allied organization conscious of his presence. If Terry went down, all Germany would know it and his chances of reaching his own lines would be practically nil.

"If Berger gets me," he told himself stoutly, "it will be sheer bull luck on his part. And he'll need all the help he's getting from the ground!"

Nearer and nearer came the ground, while Berger buzzed about Terry's head. Terry shook his fist at his enemy, and Berger raised his hand languidly. From his attitude it was plain that Berger thought nothing of his feat in knocking Terry down. It was all in a day's work. He'd promised himself to kill Terry, and he was doing it.

Terry felt like a child, a hurt, angry child.

"If I ever get out of this," he shouted into the slipstream, then broke off short as the ground spun under him. He could feel the heat of the flames now. He knew he did not dare go in at this terrific speed. He studied the flames for a moment, sweeping up along his right wing. When he leveled off, as he must, his wings would go and his motor would bury itself many feet in the ground.

He leveled, jerked his stick back, crashed in. His wheels struck. As he bounced the flames swept back toward him, but he was already leaving his pit in a desperate leap, holding his body limp as a dishrag. He struck and thought every bone in his body had been broken. He rolled like a ball, never tensing himself, knowing that if he did so he would be smashed out of human resemblance.

He dropped into a hole, over whose edge swarms of bees seemed to be buzzing as Germans blazed away at him with rifles and machine guns. Berger dived on him once, smashing the sides of the hole with lead. He heard a shell strike the remnants of his Spad, heard it explode . . . and then all he could hear were the shrill terrific noises of war.

Then he passed out, just as Berger, with a contemptuous flirt of his tail, was gone, climbing back to do battle with Terry's wingmates.

Terry, spent, leg-weary and with haunted eyes, strode onto the tarmac of the Fourteenth at the end of his travail which had included an impos-

sible escape from the shellhole, the answering of many questions asked by officers in the lines, and a foot-by-foot drag back through the support trenches. He didn't yet know what had happened to his wingmates, but now he would find out. Nobody came forth from the hangars or hutments to meet him as he staggered to the operations office to make his report.

He entered. Penny, with blood on his face, sat behind the desk. He lifted his eyes as Terry entered, and his eyes were deep sunken and terrible. They held no accusation for Terry. It was as though Penny were too far gone with exhaustion to feel like accusing anyone.

"Hello, Terry," said Penny.

TERRY leaned against the wall, staring at all that was left of the Fourteenth—five fliers, all of whom looked as though they had been through Hell. Their lips pursed grimly as they met the eyes of Sam Terry. Penny straightened, seemed to be fighting for strength. Then he looked at Terry again.

"So," he said, "you wouldn't take a dare, eh? Once more you jeopardize us all just to do something for your own ego. Not content with slipping away from that German, you had to forget the rest of us. Every bullet, every Spad, was necessary for our safety. Stumer's mob was ready for us. We flew into a trap, and when you should have been doing your part to help us all out of it, you were trying to get fresh laurels for yourself by pulling off and fighting with one man, while the rest of us had to fight odds of three to one!"

"But the man I fought was Berger," said Terry, dully.

The others cleared their throats. There was infinite meaning in the sounds. Berger or no Berger, Terry should have stuck to his own. Inside, in the middle of the fight, he could have done the most for his own squadron, and he hadn't done that. He had, moreover, lost his Spad, had almost lost his life. He felt that the others would have breathed a sigh of relief if he hadn't come back. But the others said nothing because Penny wasn't through.

"You're a fool, Terry, as I've always told you. Let a man—any man, friend or enemy—offer you a slight, however small, and you forget everything of importance to prove to him that he can, after all, do about all the things he boasts he can. You're always tackling something you can't finish. You won't take a dare! You're a mere child. A child among men. If the rest of us were like that we wouldn't last ten minutes in the air. We use our heads. We're not stampeded by what we choose to feel the enemy thinks of us, and by the Lord Harry you—"

His words were interrupted, drowned out, by the roaring of a bullet-fast plane over the tarmac.

"An Albatross!" said one of the fliers.

Machine guns chattered. But the German had come down with quiet motor, almost onto the field, before letting her out again. And then, as swiftly as he had come, he was gone again, the motor-drone dying away to the east. An orderly came in after a moment with the message the German had dropped. Penny opened it, pursed his lips, looked up at his men, covering Terry with his glance. His glance was filled with anger.

"Listen," he said, "to the nerve of these buzzards."

His eyes dropped back to the piece of paper. He began to read:

> Since you have proved yourselves not to be the hellroaring invincibles you think you are; since you have discovered that you can't whip thrice your number of Germans, perhaps it will come home to you now that Germans are fighters. They, too, can handle their share of odds. Against a like number of their own they back away from nothing that flies.
>
> To prove it, five of us challange five of you—all that are left, unless by some miracle Samuel Terry survived his crash of an hour ago, and we'll

bring another flyer on the off chance that the devil has been good to him—to combat over the lines one hour after you have received this message. I shall be one of the five or six.

Berger.

Penny stared at his flyers. Their faces were grim, hard.

"We haven't six planes in perfect condition," said one.

"But we have six that will fly," said Penny softly. "I'm taking this challenge up, understand? I'm walking out to the deadline. I'm not ordering any of you to go up again. But whoever wishes to go with me will join me at the deadline. . . ."

FIVE minutes later Penny turned to face those who had followed him. Every last surviving member of the Fourteenth had kept close on his heels! Terry was grinning like an ape, from ear to ear.

"Too bad," he said softly, "that this outfit is too bound by what is right and proper and routine to take a dare!"

Penny hesitated a moment. His lips moved, and what he said was heard distinctly by every one of the "volunteers."

"Terry, you're a batty buzzard. You can go plumb straight to Hell!"

The Fourteenth climbed into its pits, and as Terry flung his leg over the side of his cockpit, he loosed a Comanche yell which could have been heard in Berlin, which his wingmates heard above the droning of their motors:

"Watch for us, you lousy sons! When me and my friends get going and find we can't any of us take a dare—what the Hell chance have you got!"

Terry subsided only when he saw the tight appreciative grins of his wingmates. There was no anger or disapproval in their grins, only a sort of sheepish understanding. But Terry's heart went up into his throat and choked him, for these people were friends!

"Goddlemighty!" he whispered. "Goddlemighty! Could a guy throw 'em down?"

Terry knew he never would, and when the two flights, the woefully depleted Fourteenth, and the six German planes, met just back of the German lines, he was surer than ever. He looked at Penny's Spad as Berger's ship flipped out of the formation and rose above it, so that it would stand out from them all, an open challenge to Terry. Penny, understanding, looked back and waved to Terry, and the casual wave of his hand said plainly:

"Good luck, son!"

Hell's sweet bells! With the whole damn outfit approving how could anybody beat him? He snapped out of formation and hurled himself at Berger, his Vickers chattering the very second he was within range.

He felt that there was something inevitable about him, that all this had been written in the stars from the beginning. Berger couldn't even whip one side of him! Terry saw a miracle happen: his tracers smashed into the side of Berger's cockpit as Berger took just a split second too long in rolling out of line of sights. Berger seemed to hang poised for a moment, as though undecided whether to fall.

The rest of the Fourteenth went after the remaining Germans like men inspired. The clattering of Vickers and Spandaus, the roaring of Hissos and Mercedes, turned all the sky to bedlam. Terry, confident that something new and unbeatable had come to his wingmates, forgot them in favor of Berger.

And Berger seemed all at once to have a new lease on life. He recovered in the very act of starting down, and banked straight at Terry's cockpit. His Spandaus fed bullets into Terry's crate, starting just forward of the tail surfaces, and Terry knew that in a second they would reach him. He rolled faster than he ever had before, and bullets smashed his floor-boards,

drove splinters into his feet, numbing them. Berger was all around him as Terry nosed up immediately afterwards. Terry waited for the German's next move.

It came. A dive under Terry's belly. Terry zoomed, then dropped his left wing, spinning on a dime, and as he came around he saw the nose of Berger's crate in his ringsights. Instantly his knees clamped onto his stick, holding his Spad steady in her turning movement which was as inevitable as the trail of a meteor across the sky.

Bullets hammered at Berger's prop.

The prop became visible next moment, splintered and broken, but Terry's nose traveled on, his Vickers kept chattering, eating their way along the section which held the motor. Flames blossomed there, even as the battered prop began to shake the motor free of its bed.

Gritting his teeth, with little rancor in him now for the enemy who was doomed, Terry allowed his nose to travel on. Nearer and nearer it came to the cockpit, where Berger was trying frantically to get his ship under control in time. Then Terry saw Berger himself in his ringsights. And then Berger was jumping and jerking under the pounding of bullets, and his right hand was lifting slowly, as though it weighed tons, to his forehead. The salute of the vanquished to the conqueror!

And then, Berger's ship was falling. . . .

One hour and fifteen minutes later the whole Front buzzed with the news that six Americans had met six Germans by arrangement, to engage in the bloodiest sky battle ever seen in the area. Of the six Americans, four came home. One of them was Sam Terry, a much subdued young man who wasn't so sure, now, about taking dares.

Of the two surviving Germans who had crashed behind the German lines, the only two left of the six, neither one was Jacob Berger. Terry knew this was true, and that his victory would be confirmed, for Jacob Berger had gone to the well once too often and this time, his last, his pitcher had been broken.

Sam Terry had the satisfaction of knowing that he had broken it, and the sheepish grins of his wingmates proved to him that any feeling they may have had against him two hours before, had now been buried deeply in their hearts, until, perhaps, someone else hurled a challenge into the teeth of Sam Terry.

★★★

FAMOUS DOGFIGHTS

McCUDDEN vs. VON KENDALL
S.E. 5. vs. ALBATROSS

By W. E. BARRETT

IT is the history of fighting men the world over that new champions are crowned when fading veterans meet fresh, skillful youngsters who are on the way up. The flame of combat burns only so long in any man; after that he is crisp, burned out and vulnerable. Still, there is always the unforeseen to reckon with and history has been changed more than once by trifles and by small incidents that do not seem related to big issues.

A sky duel of February 18, 1918, for instance, was probably decided when an Englishman died on December 19, 1917. Strange? Of course. The man who died in December was Captain R. A. Maybery, M. C., of the R.F.C. The duel that was decided in February, 1918, involved James Byford

Royal Air Force Official

The S.E. 5 which Jimmy McCudden flew on many of his victorious flights. (Inset) Captain James Byford McCudden, victor in 57 confirmed combats. He won every decoration the British Empire could give.

(Jimmy) McCudden and Baron Otto von Kendall.

Jimmy McCudden was one of the great aces of the war. He held every rank in the R.F.C. and R.A.F. from private to major. He received every decoration that it was within the power of the British Empire to bestow. He served in England's greatest squadron (56) and he was posted to the command of the second in Fame's roll call (60). He fought in every year of the World War and he destroyed 57 enemy planes before he was twenty-two. His cup was filled, but he paid for it before he had quaffed it all.

In December, 1917, McCudden had only 26 victories and he did not have the V.C. He was on the way up and his blood still pumped hotly in his veins. He was B Flight leader in the famous 56th and all but invincible; a calm, careful, analytical sky fighter who knew every trick of the air and who used them all to win advantage for his deadly guns.

Dick Maybery was McCudden's opposite. On December 19, 1917, he had twenty victories (6 behind McCudden) and he was a member of C Flight in 56; a dashing, daring, pile-in-and-blaze-'em-down type of pilot who never figured his chances and who won through on sheer audacity and amazing luck.

The two men, so different in temperament, were close friends; close as only men can be who live together under the shadow of death.

That December day, the shadow fell. McCudden was out alone on a high patrol looking for Rumplers who crossed the lines at 20,000 feet. Maybery was flying over the lines with his flight. The Albatrosses came down roaring and the S.E.'s of C Flight turned into them and spread out across the sky with them in a wild melee. It should have been tougher on the Britons than it was; but the German flight leader was new and green and he lost his advantage very fast to the veteran English.

Baron Otto von Kendall with a bare five victories in his bag was leading a hunting pack into five of England's best. By right of birth, the Baron was destined for rank; by right of amazing flying skill, he was entitled to any flying man's respect. But he was not experienced in leading war patrols.

The S.E.'s went right up through the plunging Albatrosses. Maybery slashed one down with his first raking burst, but had no time to verify the victory. He did not follow it. He was flashing over in a virage that would bring another Hun into his sights and von Kendall saw him.

The Baron was piqued at his failure to execute a neat coup and annihilate these English. He came into Maybery like the wrath of God. And the Briton never saw him. Woodman, another member of the flight, was curling off the top of a zoom and he saw the Albatross go in; but he had no time to get down. There was a crackling burst of fire from the Spandaus, a lancing streak of tracer —and Death folded Maybery into bony arms.

SATISFIED with his kill and unwilling to risk any more of his men in fruitless combat, the German leader fired the recall signal and hit for home. He was flying the fast Albatross 5 and the S. E.'s could not have caught him if they tried. Woodman was the only one who was close enough to make an effort—and he saw only the glint of wings, the white "von K" on the tawny fuselage and the gleaming green of the Albatross tail. Those things he remembered.

And that night he told Jimmy McCudden.

As McCudden listened with his jaw hard and the pain of a deep sorrow in his eyes, Woodman had no way of knowing that there would come a day when those details that he had remembered would decide McCudden's fate above the muddy flats of

Flanders. Woodman knew only that McCudden was stirred deep down in his soul, that his fists clenched and that there was promise in the set of his lips. In that moment, Woodman was glad that he was not the pilot of the green-tailed Albatross.

The war rolled on.

Five times Jimmy McCudden saw von Kendall—and never could he come to grips with him. It was always in a swirling dogfight or a fruitless pursuit where his guns could not come up. There seemed to be a destiny in it. The Fates showed him the killer of his friend more often than they showed him any other individual German, but never were they kind enough to put the issue on the guns. And the war was taking toll of the great Jimmy.

By the middle of February, 1918, McCudden had 55 victories. He was top of the heap and he was burned out inside. Never free from headache, he flew on raw nerves that craved rest. Too many men had gone under his guns, too many bullets had quested for him, too much slaughter had taken place under his wide wings. His reflexes were slowed up and his eye had lost some of its keenness. He was beginning to have narrow escapes.

HE went hunting in his favorite lane at 20,000 feet after Rumplers on February 18th, and when he came down he was violently ill from the effects of the altitude. His head pounded and his heart refused to slow down. He had gone up three miles and a half too often—as he had done everything else connected with the war too often. And there was a regular patrol that he was slated to fly in command of B Flight. He flew it.

The Albatrosses caught that patrol cold. McCudden was cut out by a flashing German who flew the ribbons of a flight leader and who handled a ship with the sure confidence of youth, of fresh nerves and of burning ambition. Dull-eyed, desperate, McCudden cut figure eights and felt the German's speed edging him into the vertical where they would shortly chase tails to a decision.

He couldn't untrack. Once upon a time, this would have been his dish. But, once upon a time, this German would never have forced McCudden's S.E. into a game that was not S.E. fun. McCudden, whose skill had once given him dominance and permitted him to dictate the conditions of his combats, was slowed up. He knew it and through the blazing ache in his head, he wondered if this was "the day." He had given it and he expected to get it. There was a deadly lethargy in his muscles that warned him that the minute was close.

Then on the flash of a turn, he saw the green tail and the white letters "von K." Something burst inside of McCudden like a time bomb. A face leaped out of the mist before his eyes. Maybery! He had pledged vengeance for Maybery and he had been balked. In the wide halls of Valhalla, he could not shake Dick Maybery's hand and say "He got me, too." He had to go over and say "I paid your score, fellow, and now I'm here."

It was like that. The thoughts clicked swiftly and the S.E. came to sudden life. Where there had been a tired hand and a drugged brain behind the controls, there was suddenly Jimmy McCudden—Jimmy of the flaming guns, of the rows of ribbon, of the long glory trail from greaseball to commander.

As swift as a rabbit breaking cover, the S.E. leaped the deadly circle. Startled, the German flashed over fast for his shot. He got it, but his aim was hurried. He never got another. Jimmy McCudden was diving only long enough to give his ship momentum. He laid back on the stick and the S.E. went straight up as only an S.E.—of all fighting ships—could. Up like a rocket! Wings sent heliographic flashes of light across the sky

as they flipped over at the top of the zoom. Von Kendall carried forward by the weight of his heavy Mercedes engine looked up, startled.

It was his last look at life. McCudden came booming down and the guns spat flame and smoke; the guns that couldn't come to life to save McCudden were vitalized now to pay for Maybery. And they paid the score.

Von Kendall took the burst across his chest, leaped convulsively and let the stick go. And he reached Valhalla first . . . McCudden circled in the sky.

Fifty-six! It was the last scout that ever fell to McCudden's guns. It was the number of his squadron and the victory number of his last single seater. A week later he collapsed on his own drome while walking to his ship and was ordered back to England. Before he went, he took one final fling and downed a Hannoveraner to make it 57 in the log—and then he went.

The German guns had had their last chance at him. He never faced them again, but perhaps they killed him after all; killed him slowly by robbing him of the nervous energy that had made him master of the air. He had lived long on borrowed time and on July 9, 1918, he was killed in a flying accident; a simple, sunny-skies take-off that should have been duck-soup for a kaydet.

But he might have died in February — and von Kendall lived — if Maybery had not gone under "Greentails" guns in December of '17.

McCUDDEN vs. VON KENDALL

S.E.5 vs. Albatross

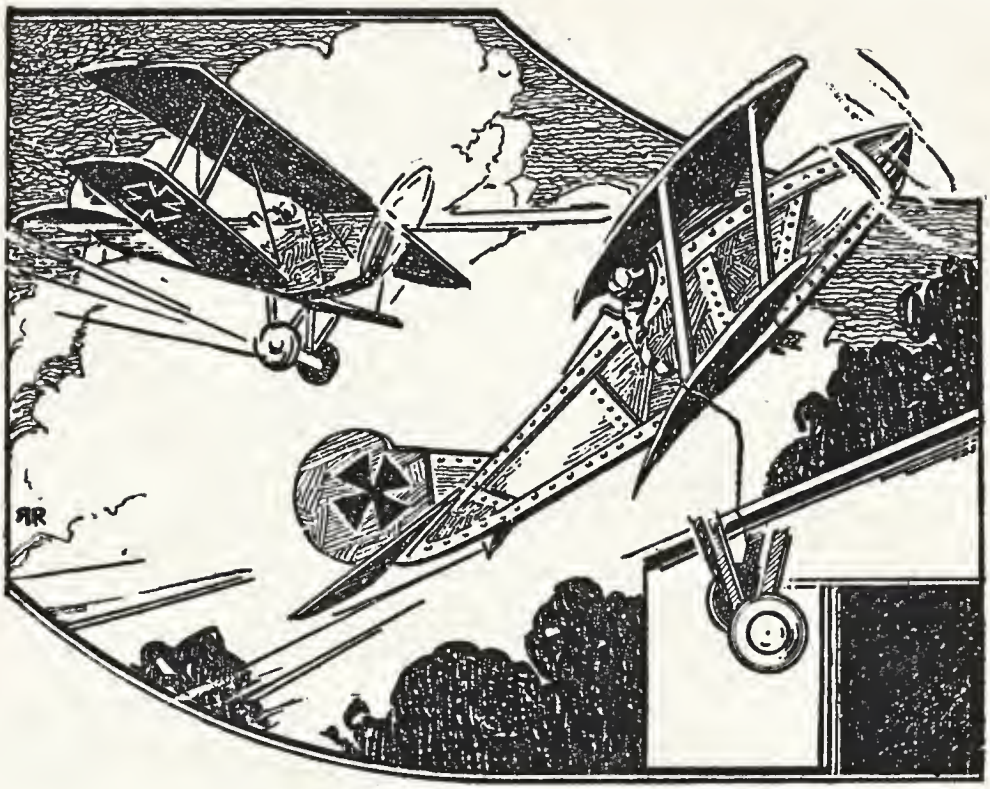
February, 18, 1918

S.E.5		ALBATROSS (D-5)
26′5″	Span	29′7″
21′	Length	24′
Hispano	Engine	Mercedes
200	Horsepower	220
120-125	Speed	135-140
1322	Weight (empty)	1368
1953	Weight (war load)	1948

This Month's Cover

The picture portrayed on the cover of this issue was the experience of a War Birds' author. He outlined it to one of our staff artists who painted it. Bill Alexander, author of "Lucky Stiff" on page 112, is the gunner. He and his pilot were making a night observation hop across the lines in a Salmson two-seater. Without warning a flight of Albatross D-7s dropped on them.

The Albatross had spotted them many thousand feet higher and cut their motors while diving. As they struck they split around Alexander and his pilot, pounding them with steel and tracer. Only by a miracle did they escape. Alexander is shown in the heat of the fight firing his Lewis gun. It is mounted on a Scharff ring in the rear cockpit.



He dropped his trucks in time to clear the hangar.

STAFFEL OF STEEL

By CURTIS MITCHELL

They Were Ships of Steel and They Meant Death to Those Who Flew Against Them — Death Until Ric Gillette Used the Trick That No Man Knew.

COUNT EMIL VON LEDDER had trailed the Spad with the scarlet diamond markings for months. Now he had it.

When you've trailed a crate week in and week out, when you've been made a monkey in front of your flight; when you are a veteran of four years on the same bitter front and an upstart American comes along to mock and sneer, you're out for blood. That was the count. That is why he gave the "stay clear" signal to the other five planes in his formation and hammered his nose into a roaring dive.

The Yank below cruised straight into Germany, looking like a fat, brown dragonfly in the late afternoon sunshine. Off west, the front seemed asleep. Brown autumn squares in Germany's green fields made a brilliant patchwork. Ric Gillette saw all that. He saw, too, the hornet shape boring out of the heights.

Emil von Ledder hooked his Albatross D5 through the Spad's backwash, his eyes holding the scarlet diamond on the Spad's side. His teeth

gleamed briefly and he curled a thumb across his stick trigger. A dozen times in these two months he had seen that red diamond, even had it in his sights. And a dozen times the cocky Yank had escaped. Why? The count's men had an explanation. Four years in this mill burned out a man's eyes. Two hundred weeks of flights and fights take away that split second co-ordination of muscle and mind that made or broke sky fighters. Von Ledder knew those whispered alibis his men made for him.

NOW, as he raced to the kill, phrases blazed and died in his mind like scarlet neon signs. "Washed up . . . lost his nerve . . . too old . . . *kaput.*"

Flinging them out of his brain as his ship bored forward, he knew that this fight would deny the charges. Lost his nerve, eh? He hawked closer to the blind-backed Spad. The Yank's head was a leather blob in the dead center of his ring sights. The count laughed. This wasn't a man's fight, it was a set-up.

Black smoke poured suddenly from the Spad ahead. It broke away and came again, spurting. Von Ledder held his bursts while he traced those sooty strings up to exhausts. They were coming from just one side of the plane.

His thumb uncurled from trigger tabs and the leanness went out of his jaw. This was what he wanted. The Amerikaner was crippled, helpless. "Yank Ace Forced to Land by Count von Ledder." "Von Ledder Humbles Yankee Flyer." "Amerikaner Falls to von Ledder's Skill." Headlines, those were, flitting through his mind. Headlines formed opinions, and opinions could save for von Ledder his staffel command.

On half-throttle, he swept alongside his quarry. The leather blob turned to a round, incredulous face that stared dumbly into his own. With an arrogant wave, the count punched a finger earthward, pantomiming his command to Gillette.

The face turned away and the Spad flew straight on, heedless. Von Ledder kept alongside for the length of time it takes blood to flood one's neck and face. Behind, the remainder of his flight rode sloppily in a loose formation, losing altitude on half-throttle.

The count jumped his gun against the quadrant stop. The Spad was banging east, smoking and wobbling, and his lead cut a venomous swath across her bows.

"Halt," he screamed. "Halt and land."

He knew his men were watching and he glanced back. When he looked again at the Spad, she had turned. She had turned until she faced the Albatross, and now she was boring up at him like a tiger shark. Red, clean flame was spurting from both exhausts.

The *wheeeee* of Vickers lead chased a chill along his spine. Holes marched down a wing and stopped. He realized that he had been tricked and a berserk fury lifted him half out of his pit. As he shook under the rage, he bumped both triggers down and fired blindly. A torrid blast answered, touched his cheek, and vanished. Under his nose, a phosphorous curl broke and hissed. The black, boring shape of the Spad came closer, fire in her teeth. Then it lifted, blotting out the sky, and he saw a round smudged face grinning like a gargoyle from the Spad pit.

With a derisive wave and roll, Ric Gillette snarled away toward the lines. Count von Ledder signaled to his flight but they had lost too much altitude to dive and the Spad was as fast as their Albatross.

Ten minutes later, Ric clowned out of the sky over the 11th Pursuit Squadron's drome with his Hisso banging like a broken riveting machine. Mechanics ran onto the field in time to watch him go into a roll. Black smoke poured from his ex-

haust and the deep-chested Spad staggered. When the top wing got down, the dead bank caught and the black smoke vanished. Ric screwed her upright, scraped a hedge and came in fast.

Lieutenant Dixie Smith met her at the line. Ric stretched in his pit and scratched a palm.

"What I mean, you owe me dough," he said.

"I can't hear a word," cracked Dixie.

"We bet," Ric explained, "that I couldn't go into von Ledder's backyard, give him the sun and altitude and the first crack, and still come home with the bacon. I'll take folding money please."

Dixie put his hand under his chin. "What's the idea of this here one-lunger demonstration?"

"Listen." Gillette snapped a knife-blade switch beneath his instrument board. The idling motor began to stutter and buck as the right bank cut.

"And the smoke?" added Dixie.

Ric swung his mixture lever over until it was hard against the rich marker. Black exhaust billowed out of the stacks.

"The boy inventor, eh?"

"Listen, you," Ric snapped. "When we've got to go so far into Germany to find a kraut that'll fight, it takes more than a pair of Vickers to bring 'em down. I had this guy thinking I couldn't ever get home on one bank. Thought I was duck soup. Wanted me to land. I could have brained him with a monkey wrench."

"If a bank cuts out and won't cut back, then what?"

"If it's in the cards, son, it's in the cards."

"Yeah?"

"Get this," Ric said. "If you ever see me tangling with a Jerry—me with one bank dead and the other smoking, don't come bargin' in. I won't need you, see. I'm playing a game. Got it?"

"Got it."

A peal of thunder rolled across the drome. The earth seemed to shake as a jagged streak of lightning split the sky in the west. A thunderhead like a misshapen skull was riding up the wind.

"There goes our bat detail," said Dixie. "The Limeys were going over to bomb dumps tonight. We were to escort. Well, I can sleep."

Ric cut his switch and dropped over the side to the ground. "Binge?" he suggested.

"Lissen," Dixie said. "You're screwy enough without adding likker to your system. Any guy that goes up and lets a Jerry pot at him."

"He didn't pot at me, son. He waggled his arms, wanted me to land and split a bowl of schnapps."

"You can't keep on playing with him, Ric. He's a sweet flyer himself, you know. And that ring-tailed flight of his is out to get you. You know that, don't you?"

"I only know what I hear," said Ric.

Smith breathed a hot, deep breath. "You're askin' for it, Ric. You're askin' for it."

"An' if I was careful, what?" Gillette spat. "You don't get stick notches for bein' careful, Dixie. And you don't get any fun. Cripes, I want some fun." He looked at the swelling thunderhead and started down the tarmac. "Binge?" he said again hopefully.

"Oke," Smith answered.

BACK on the Hun drome in the bend of the river beyond St. Beaucomb, Count Emil von Ledder slid off altitude like a fish hawk and trimmed with his trucks cutting grass. His Albatross was still quivering on the line when his pilots curved out of the sky and set their ships against the soil.

The count's grease-browned face was like a mask as he peeled off

flying togs and hurled them at a mechanic. Two flyers from an idle flight sauntered toward him, saw his gesture, and changed their minds.

Von Ledder's brain spun in the vacuum of sound left when his engine quit. The crates of his flight, edging in toward the line, brought a tightness to his jaw. "Ach, they laugh again," he told himself. "They saw the Yank trick me." Something caused him to spin about. A gangling mechanic was leaning beside the count's cockpit, tracing bullet holes that circled it.

"I'll paint them out, ja?" he asked.

"Strip it," von Ledder barked. "Strip away the fabric and recover it."

A door slammed across the field and his eyes leaped toward the sound. A thin lathe of a man stood before a shack that was the field office. His attitude conveyed a warning to the count. Stiff-legged, von Ledder began to walk.

The man vanished inside the shack. That was Otto Rober, second in command. He and the count were cousins. Back on the field, pilots got out of their ships and bunched together. Through the back of his head, von Ledder sensed their talk and felt their guarded looks. He reached his office and went through the door.

"What is it, Otto?"

The lathe-like man straightened and smiled. "An orderly brought it up ten minutes after you left." His eyes went to the desk.

Von Ledder's followed them to the packet of paper, grey-blue in color and grease-smudged, but bearing the purple seal of the High Command. His lips sucked air. "It has come, yes."

Clawing off the seal, ripping the envelope, he swore wildly. The blurred words said:

From: Colonel von Horleck-Vorbeck
Imperial Air Staff.
To. Count Emil von Ledder,
Commanding Staffel XXIV.

My dear count:

The end of the war is in sight. Here in Essen we have developed new ships that are destined to bring victory to the Fatherland. Ships of steel. Faster than anything in the air. They will sweep the sky and blind the Allies. It is the instrument of victory we have sought for four years.

To you goes the honor of preparing these ships for battle. They are already in the last stages of preparation. You, who know fighting and flying as no other man in Germany, will be the first to fly them, and then to lead them to victory.

These are your orders. You are herewith relieved of command of Staffel XXIV. Report immediately to Field K, Area III, Essen. Test these ships in every possible way. God be with you."

PLANES made thunder on the tarmac that was echoed by thunder in the sky. A gust of wind rattled the door. Without warning, von Ledder's neck bowed over until his forehead rested on his arm against the desktop.

"Steady," said Otto.

"I won't leave."

"I've ordered your car for tonight."

The count's chin lifted. "I'm still in command here, Otto."

"You *were* in command."

The count was silent for a long moment. Rober bent down and ran a hand across his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Emil."

"Did you see my ship just now?"

"No."

"The Yank's bullets were everywhere." His eyes flattened to vindictive flakes.

"You'll get a rest and come back."

"I don't need a rest, Rober. Mein Gott, after four years of flying, am I not a better pilot? If I meet him again . . ."

"You've met him a dozen times, Emil."

"But the next time . . ."

Rober's temper was rising. "And be made a fool again, yet? Not before this staffel."

The count was quiet but behind his eyes gleamed a deepening humiliation. "All right," he said. "I go

to Essen but, Herr Gott, I fly there. My old Fokker . . . it's my own. I bought it, paid for it." His lips tightened and his voice dropped to a whisper. "And when these tin ships are ready for the air, I return for the Amerikaner schweinehund. Give orders, Otto. As long as you are opposite him, save him. Save him until I come back."

ACROSS the lines, Lieut. Ric Gillette awoke to the clanging of cymbals and tolling of bells. Each detonation thundered down the corridors of his brain. Half-blind with sleep, he couched his head on two unsteady hands and peered at the radium dial of his clock.

Three ack emma!

"On your feet, cowboy." That was Dixie's voice.

"Go drown yourself."

A hand fastened in his collar and shunted him to an upright position. The sound of a motor's exhaust trickled through the dark. He tried to think, tried to remember the binge that had put him on his back. In memory, he heard Dixie's singsong: "Vin rouge, vin blanc, and get the lead out of them pants, *garcon.*"

But now Dixie was snarling, "Up and at 'em, fella."

Little prickles dusted his spine and he swung to his feet. His memory stirred. Vaguely, he remembered faces, one of them thin and leathery under a gold-braided Frog cap.

"How're you feelin'?" Dixie demanded.

"I'll take aspirin."

"Boy, you were stinko."

"Am," Ric corrected.

He saw an indistinct movement, something that caught light and reflected it, and then icy water smothered his face.

"Sorry," Dixie mocked. "The general ordered me to bring you around."

Ric cleared his eyes and shook off the wetness. "What general?"

"St. Omer, the Frog intelligence king pin."

"I don't get it."

"You mean you don't remember that you made this date?"

"Date?" Did I make a date?"

Dixie swore broadly and fluently. Ric shook his head.

"Guess I was ridin' high last night. I remember taking the Limey's pants off down at Georges. After that . . ."

"I ought to bop you," Dixie cracked.

"Cut the clownin'. What's this date you've been suggestin'."

Dixie leaned forward. "You ran into St. Omer at Mimi's. You were pals. You agreed to go into Germany if he got orders through releasing you from the outfit."

"You're crazy."

"Remember him tellin' you about the town of Essen up back of Holland somewhere?"

"Nope."

"And him sayin' the Krupp outfit has developed a steel that's like linen, and built a lot of bullet-proof crates out of the stuff, hunh?"

"You sound like a story book."

"Before you passed out, you were goin' up there to cop one of those tin buggies for the general. You were going to bring it back alive so St. Omer and his technicians could see what made it tick."

"I was, eh?"

"Yes."

Ric bent down and silently pulled on his boots. The corners of his mouth tucked in tight as he turned toward the door. "Where'll I find this St. Omer?"

Motor music drummed up through the night and died to a whisper. Dixie followed Ric out. "He's waitin' at the hangar," he said. "That's your crate warming."

A yellow blob in the hangar showed a ship's wings behind the disc of an idling prop. Human forms flitted through the light and faded. Ric strode through the unlaced door looking for a French general. A hand brushed his sleeve and the gleam from

a flashlight hung suddenly on his face.

"It is you, hein?"

"Are you St. Omer?"

"But of course, mon ami."

Ric tried to see his features in the darkness, tried to place the voice. "I was blotto when we talked about this hop," he said. "Better run over it again."

"It is simple—dangerous—and it may save France."

A new light blazed alongside the ship and Ric saw strange emblems and markings. St. Omer's words came with a rush.

"The ship is a Nieuport painted in the manner of the Holland military. As an interned officer, you escape and steal this plane from a field." He thrust clothes at Ric. "Take this, mon ami. It is the Dutch fatigue uniform. Mon Dieu, you should be convincing."

"Wait a minute," Ric protested. "My German chatter may get by but how'll I prove I'm a kraut?"

"Of a certainty, we have that. Every paper you may need is in these pockets. You are Johann Greir, interned in 1917 when empty essence tanks dropped you in Holland. The swines will not know that the real Greir was killed."

"Says you."

"Your job, *s'l vous plait,* is to find those steel ships and bring one back. Or a bit of their fabric, if nothing more. *Mon brave,* you must not fail. Their field is on the road from Essen to Dusseldorf. When you pick it up . . ."

FOR ten minutes, with maps and pins, St. Omer showed Ric the way to this hidden aerie of tin eagles. His information placed them exactly, and the pulsing beat of his voice told Ric more than mere words the acute danger they represented to the Allied cause.

When he went to the Nieuport's pit, Dixie came up and threw an arm across his shoulders. "You many hit it."

"Thanks, kid."

"An' take it easy, Ric. Forget that hammer-headed yen of yours for excitement. This is damn serious."

"It ought to be fun," Ric said.

In three minutes, he was off. At five thousand feet, he leveled off and started north and east. Black night engulfed the tiny ship, smothered it. Even the front was lifeless. After a while, he crossed the shining streak of the River Moselle and watched it fade under his right wing. Later, the broader, brighter Rhine edged up under the same wing and he sighted the lights of Cologne and then Dusseldorf.

When Essen was still only a black smudge on his map twenty-odd miles north of Dusseldorf and gas was sloshing the bottoms of his tanks, the plane began to buck and weave. The earth, hitherto quite easily followed, turned gray and elusive. Dropping swiftly, he got astride the Essen road and tried to hold it under his trucks. No easy job, that. Wind lifted him and hurled him down, straining linen and fabric and spinning his stomach.

Rain began to batter. Huge drops that hit like marbles. The engine coughed and sputtered and picked up again. He knew the tanks were almost dry. Ahead, a hill rose in a gentle slope crowned by tall trees that bent like huge bows under the storm. Lightning lighted the air and earth as his motor sputtered again.

When you're on the spot, you don't waste time wondering what to do. You do it. Ric cut his gun and rode up a blast until his trucks cut a swathe through top branches. The gale buffeted his ship to a standstill and he plunged earthward. A wingtip lodged in a limb crotch and spun the plane. As the spar exploded, he slapped the side of his cockpit twice and was hurled forward. The bite of glass in his cheeks shocked him

briefly and then the world whirled away leaving him spinning in space.

When he came to, he was hanging from safety strap, head down. Save for wind and rain, the woods were silent. It took twenty minutes to work his way to the ground and another hour to find the road. The secret field of the steel ships, he knew, lay on toward Essen.

How long he plodded, he did not remember; nor how far he went before the first streak of light broke through the eastern cloud barrage. But it showed a huge flat, fringed with camber-roofed buildings. A sagging windsock hung over one. Ric checked his map carefully and tore it into small bits that he stamped into the mud.

A barb-wire fence bounded the field. Each post was wrapped in a vertical roll of the prickly stuff. But no guards were in sight. Walking on, he found a sapling that stood eight feet outside the fence and fifteen above it. Its growth inclined it gently toward the field. He climbed into its unsteady top, and hurled himself from side to side like an inverted pendulum. Years earlier in the country, he had learned that small boy trick. The sapling bent farther and farther toward the fence, sagged from his dead weight and presently suspended him clear beyond the wires. He dropped inside the enclosure.

"Field K, Area III, here I come," he whispered as he slid toward the nearest building. Five minutes later, he staggered across its rude steps and lay at full length, moaning and beating the threshold with his fists.

It took three minutes of honest pounding to rouse anyone. Finally, a white face peered through a crack in the door. Ric moaned and twisted on his stomach. The face vanished and returned presently with two others. The men were obviously mechanics.

"Water . . . doctor," Ric breathed.

They lifted him and took him inside to a bed. The room was large and full of empty bunks. Someone doused his face with cold water and washed the blood off his cut cheeks. A fourth German joined the group. He was young, suspicious, every inch the Junker officer.

"How did you get here?" he demanded in German.

Ric pointed up. "Crashed in the storm . . . been in Holland . . . interned . . . grabbed this plane . . ." He dropped back exhausted.

"Where did you crash?"

"In the forest. Please, I'm tired."

The officer lifted a map off a nearby table and brought it close. "You will get rest after I know more about you."

Ric pushed himself up on his elbows. "I'm Johann Grier," he screamed. "I was with Jagdstaffel Eighteen at Kirchoff last year until I fell in Holland."

Through the closed door came the purr of a powerful motor. The officer frowned and went to a window. Mechanics shifted uneasily as the thunder came straight overhead and then died. The officer crossed to the door with a bound and two of his men followed him out. The third watched Ric cautiously.

LISTENING hard, Ric heard the rumble of wheels and put the pattern of sounds together to form that of a landing ship. Motor bursts near at hand confirmed his hunch.

"You fly early, here," he told his guard.

"Not us," said the man. "We're expecting a new Oberst this morning. A famous flyer, he is. A man who can fly anything."

"Anything? What do you mean, anything?"

The German tightened his lips. "Never you mind. Things have happened since you left us. We are doing great things. These ships will end the war. Everybody says so. Just as soon as we can get them into

the air. And Count von Ledder is the man to do it."

"Von Ledder!" Ric's lips spurted the word before he could halt.

"Ah, you've heard of him even in Holland, yes?"

"Why, sure . . ."

"He is our new officer commanding. He will show these . . ."

Ric's mind boiled and cold chills chased up and down his spine. Impossible, he told himself. Yesterday, he had scared the life out of von Ledder. Perhaps this was another man with the same name, a brother maybe. If it wasn't, and if the count recognized him—the thought dug his fingernails deep into wet palms.

THROUGH the door, a voice shouted "Attention!" The German stiffened and Ric closed his eyes. Footsteps jarred the flimsy floor and he heard someone say, "Here he is, Count von Ledder." That was the suspicious officer who had run onto the tarmac from this room.

Ric groaned softly and turned half-away. The officer said, "This man turned up on the doorsteps here a while ago. Claims he's been interned in Holland. Claims he stole plane and flew out. Says he crashed somewhere in the woods."

Ric knew this was his moment. The wrong word or movement would doom him to a firing squad at the crack of tomorrow's dawn. He opened his eyes.

Von Ledder's gaze crossed his and held. "You say you flew out of Holland, mein friend? What ship?"

"Nieuport," Ric said.

The count looked at Ric, breathing deeply. Presently, he turned to another officer. "He's right," he said. "I saw it in the trees a few miles south. Dutch Nieuport markings. Get a man down for salvage."

"Ja, Oberst."

"And Kleinert," the count continued, "we might as well get started on these tests. Get all the ships on the line. I wish to test then."

As the officer left, the count turned back to Ric. "Flyer, eh?"

"What, staffel!"

"Eighteenth."

The count's brows drew almost imperceptibly together. "I knew their commander. Trained at Abbendorf, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Your name."

"Johann Greir."

The count smiled coldly. "Your ship looked like it hit hard," he said. "We must take good care of you. I will see you again."

When he had gone, Ric shifted on his side and breathed again. Apparently, his German had escaped the suspicion of these around him. Obviously, the count had not recognized him. Thanks to swollen cheeks and the absence of familiar goggles. Yet, something hadn't been quite straight. Von Ledder only yesterday had been almost within spitting distance as Ric pulled his ship up over the Albatross. It didn't seem possible that he could fail to notice some similarity.

More than that, though, his presence here meant something. The Boche wasn't fooling. If they pulled an ace like the count out of the lines, they had something here of more than casual significance.

The hot feeling that comes under some men's gaze seized him and he jerked his head around to meet the eyes of the Junker officer who had first interviewed him.

"How are you feeling?" the German said.

"Yes and no," said Ric.

"I want you to understand something," the Junker said. "You can listen now?"

"Yes."

"You are the first outsider to get on this field in six weeks. Now you are in, you stay in. Not even if the doctor says you are dying, do you get out. I don't know how much you saw before you reached this build-

ing. No matter, you are here and you stay here. Is that clear?"

"Plenty."

The officer spun away and closed the door leaving Ric alone. "Roll out your tin toys," he said sleepily. "I'm standing pat." His eyelids dropped and he was asleep.

MOTOR noise jarred him awake. The snarling surly noise that comes from a souped-up motor. He went to a window, eager. On the sill was a Stillson-type wrench. Some mechanic's tool, no doubt. It fitted the vague plans that were already forming in his mind. Short and heavy, it could be useful in a fight. He slid it deep in a pocket.

Through the window, he saw something that drove a jolt the length of his body. A row of shining, spangle-spotted planes with torpedo bodies and flying fish wings. From prop hub to rudder, they were metal; and covered all over with such a covering as he had never seen.

He noted the slope of their noses, the sweepback of the upper wing and the setback of the lower. Mainly alike, some of them were slightly different. But now, one spinning motor was heating for a test flight. And Count von Ledder was sitting in the pit, barking orders at mechanics.

As Ric watched, he ordered out the blocks and propped his tail on the prop blast. The runaway was a mile-long stretch of turf. The count went into it, tail high and handsome. Ric watched, holding his breath.

You can tell if a ship is going to fly in the first hundred yards, if you're an expert. To Ric, this one looked loggy. As she gained speed, she swerved heavily. Von Ledder straightened and tried to lift her. One wing tilted, then the other, but she kept her trucks against the earth.

Motor thunder cut out and she slowed to a crawl. Almost silently, the count brought her around and back to the line. His face was unpleasant as he slid off the whaleback.

"Overweight," he snarled, "Gott in Himmel, she'll never fly."

"More power might do it," an officer suggested.

"Where will you get it. Not out of our motors. We don't build them that big." He looked down the line. "They are failures, I tell you. They would be better off in the river."

The young Junkers officer flushed and took a step forward. "They will fly, sir. There is a difference in some of them. I know one of them will fly."

"Who are you?" Von Ledder demanded roughly.

"I am the designer," said the youth.

"Fathead," the count spat. "But warm them up. I will show you what they will do."

One by one, Ric watched him drive ship after ship into the wind and return furiously to the line, cursing and fuming. Only one bus got her tires out of the turf. One that had mounted in her a new V-8 Hisso engine that had been lifted out of a captured Spad. The tone of her exhaust and the squared up fairing over her made her design unmistakable. But it only hopped a few yards and squashed back again and again. Wrathfully, Count von Ledder hurled her into one last attempt.

As he went away across the runway, Ric moved to the door. Beyond the last steel ship stood the count's Fokker, the ship he had flown up from his staffel drome. She was ready to fly. Reasoning swiftly, he realized that his business here was finished. These ships of steel were duds. That news was all General St. Omer awaited. No use now to try to take one back to him.

Limping cautiously, he got through the door and into the open. No one paid any attention to him; all eyes were watching the weaving tail of that last tin torpedo plane. He passed the first three ships on the line. Two more and then the Fokker.

His ears told him that von Ledder had cut his gun once more. Within seconds, he would come bumbling back to the line, black in the face and furious. A hand brushed his shoulder and he wheeled to see the friendly grin of the German mechanic who had guarded him early that morning.

"I said to myself," the German explained, "that you would be no real airman if you did not come out for a look at these."

Ric wanted to smash him and race on to the Fokker. His hand dropped to the wrench in his pocket, but the coughing approach of von Ledder stopped him. Maybe the count would make one more attempt. That would hold every eye on the field. Now, too many were around to watch.

"Yes," he answered. "It is too bad they won't fly."

"They will fly," the Jerry said. "But they need more work yet."

"Is this stuff really bullet proof?" Ric pretended an interest, moved up to the tail of a plane. His thumb tried the metal fabric. Curious stuff. Sort of woven wire-like resembling tweed suiting. Some spots were reinforced by a paper thin plating. His thumbnail failed to dent it.

"It is from Krupp in Essen," the German mechanic said. "They tell us it is bullet-proof."

Ric studied the ship, noticed the heaviness of her undercarriage and wheels. Typically German construction, that. A French design would have got that ship off in no time. His eyes found the place where undercarriage struts slotted into the fuselage. Two bolts held them.

COUNT VON LEDDER rolled up to the line, blipped the tail into the wind as a greaseball steadied one low wing, and lurched out of the cockpit. His eyes crossed Ric's.

"Well, mein freund of the Eighteenth, you knew what sky fighting was. What do you think of these lame ducks I have."

Ric thought fast. The Fokker was out of the question now. At least, for the present. And some inner itch made him want to feel the stick of that tin turkey. He gauged the count's humor and let him have it.

"I think they'd fly if you knew how to handle them," he said.

The count's grim face flooded. The friendly German mechanic backpedaled softly and diplomatically. Von Ledder's voice, when it came, was surprisingly mild.

"You say you have done no flying for a year?"

"I was interned, you know."

"But one of these crows might fly —if properly handled, eh?"

"Yes."

"You might handle her, ja?"

"I can fly her," Ric said.

The count's lips made a crooked line and he laughed silently, until his lean body shook with evil mirth. It made Ric uneasy.

"Get in the pit," von Ledder ordered softly.

Ric rubbed his hands together, and forked the steel-shod side. Von Ledder came close and leaned his chin over the combing. With his own hands, he took his goggles and placed them over Ric's eyes. A secret, vicious smirk hung in the corners of his lips.

"Wait a minute," Ric said, smarting with uneasiness.

"Greir," von Ledder said, "haven't we met somewhere before today. I never forget a face."

"I think not," Ric said.

"You're positive?"

"Positive."

"Johann Greir of the Eighteenth Jagdstaffel carried a saber cut over his right temple," said the count. "I knew him because, when he trained, I was the Eighteenth's commander."

Ric felt his legs go numb. Odd little jerks roved the breadth of his stomach. What should he say to von Ledder? What could he do to stop the probing of those suspicious, bright

eyes. Before he could move, the Hun's voice rang harshly.

"I know you now, Amerikaner. You are Gillette, ja! You are the dog who tried to humiliate me before my men, are you not?"

"You're crazy," Ric snapped.

"The goggles did it, my good friend. If I had not put them on you, you might have escaped."

The throttle knob of the armored ship lay like an ember in the palm of Ric's hand. The prop spun smoothly as the idling Frog Hisso chuckled to itself. The count's words merged with its hoarse cadence.

"I've got you, Gillette . . . I will crucify you."

Ric drove the throttle knob hard ahead and saw the sudden prop blast spin von Ledder away. The ship lurched like a spurred bronc. Tail a-weaving, he rode her onto the runway like a wild man.

That first hundred yards told him he couldn't make it. That extra needed push wasn't in the motor. If he kept going, it meant a crash and all that went with it; if he stopped, it meant von Ledder would be on his neck like an avenging demon. Shifting, he felt the swell of that wrench in his pocket. A thought streaked through his brain. Before, that wrench had been a weapon; now it might be something else. Right rudder swung the plane in a crazy, careening curve toward a far corner of the field. Hitting the switch, goosing the motor, tipping on one wheel and then the other, he gave a startling half-wit demonstration of ground-looping. It camouflaged, he hoped as he neared the field's far edge, his real intentions. A final whirl faced him back toward the runway and hangars.

Wire! He needed wire. Double controls ran the length of the fuselage from rudder bar to empennage. Jamming one of the strands against an angle iron, he hammered it flat with the wrench and broke it. At the opposite end, he broke it also.

By now, the Germans were coming after him. He saw them swarming across the tarmac, heard their shouts. His wrench smashed the combing about undercarriage strut housing. Only two bolts held those struts and that heavyweight undercarriage to the fuselage, he remembered. He found those bolts, spun off their nuts, and bent a turn of wire under each octagon head.

As he slid back into the pit, the motor's blast drowned a chorus of yells. The Jerries were fifty feet away. Gathering the slack wire into his lap like reins, he souped the Hisso hard and went away from there.

Straight back at the main hangar with the wind under his tail, this time. Not too fast, though. Rough ground bounced the ship and Ric slowed her enough to absorb the jar. It wouldn't do for those bolts to bounce out.

Fifty feet from the count, he veered again and went through a perfectly timed ground loop that laid his tail almost under von Ledder's chin. The Boche stood spraddle-legged, a sneer contorting his lips. Ric rose in his pit and yelped:

"Now watch her fly."

Something in his manner washed the contempt off von Ledder's face. He had seen this Yank do many amazing things. This might be another miracle. Heeling about, he sprinted toward his Fokker, shouting to mechanics.

RIC rocked away, a steel-sheathed tornado. Every bit of his flying skill and experience went into that hell-bent charge. The speed needle spun up . . . forty . . . sixty . . . eighty. Riding her like a jockey, he held her up with a feather-touch on the stick. She picked up a few more miles, accelerated from eighty to eighty-five . . . eighty-six! He backed the stick, praying.

She hopped. Just as she had when the count handled her. He took her

back down with front stick, bumped her hard and then, as she shivered, backed the stick again. With his left hand, he laid his weight on that loop of wire. One end jerked free, bringing a bolt with it. The landing gear dropped from one side, swung crazily below the fuselage. He tried to loosen that other bolt but it was jammed. Holding the stick with his knees, he wrapped both fists in wire, got his back up in a heart-breaking pull. The bolt in the strut slipped an inch, caught, and whipped clear like a bullet. That undercarriage broke away from the plane and ripped a gash in tarmac turf.

The lightened ship lifted.

Ric pulled bloody wire out of his flesh where it had buried itself, and gave the crate her head. She skimmed the bark-wire boundary fence at the runway's end with feet to spare.

"A neat trick, if you can do it," he said soberly, looking over a shoulder at the hangars.

HIS relief at getting the crate off didn't last long. A streaking Fokker wing stopped his sight less than a half-mile behind. Von Ledder, that. He was already off the ground and his hornet nose suddenly wore a wreath of red as he ran warming bursts through his Spandau snouts.

Leveling off, Ric paced himself with the throttle full-out. The Fokker hung on like a leech. The two planes had scacely any variation in top speeds. Which would be all right in a straightaway flight, but here he had to swing back around toward France. Von Ledder would intercept him then. And that wouldn't be so good, not with the Fokker carrying Spandau twins and the steel crate without even a cap pistol.

But she did have one thing. Gas! Her tanks were big. Enough to take her places if she could stay in the air. If the beady-eyed ace behind didn't blast her down. Ric thumped the pit-side with his fist. Was it really bullet-proof? It looked terribly fragile. Well, one way to find out was to cut back home.

Toward France, a cloudy rampart lay like China's Wall along the horizon. It looked thick, angry, but hospitable. Right rudder and aileron heeled the steel ship over. Across a shoulder, he saw his pursuer correct his course and come boring in. This was the danger he courted, and he staked everything on the bullet-proof stuff with which his ship was said to be covered.

In a minute now . . . in seconds . . . von Ledder would be within range. The Hisso motor strained at her mountings but the heavy load held down her speed. The Fokker gained, crept close and Ric glimpsed ring-sights on her nose lining up on his cockpit side.

Would that thin metal shed high velocity bullets? Could any armored plane live against Spandau steel? He straightened out with this nose toward the horizon he knew was France. Already, the secret Hun drome lay a dozen miles behind. Motor music made a din in his ears. And then the hoarse bark of emma guns jerked goose pimples out of his skin.

"Blaze away, you stiff-necked clown," he answered.

The count's second blast whistled around his ears. Sulphur curls spun and writhed and then he sticked his crate down and up in a screaming Immelmann. Von Ledder followed. Ric pulled his head below the combing and worked on the stick. The steel ship answered but her weight was too much to match the Fokker's agility. It followed, banked off and back, and came in from the side, throwing lead again.

Ric knew, as he watched the charge, that this was the show-down. Iron-fingered, he held his course, waiting.

The blast hit like a sleet storm. A wingtip caught it first. He studied it as disinterestedly as if he had been in a laboratory. He saw sparks, and flakes of metal. And needle-fine slits

that were so thin he couldn't believe his eyes.

A second gust ripped nearer, scoring the lower wing. Some of the bullets dented the sheathing and bounded away, their whimper ricochetting a blood-chilling sound. But some didn't bounce. They went through that bullet-proof fabric as if it were paper. The count, cooling his guns for a moment, turned his nose toward the steel ship's cockpit.

What chance had a lone man with no weapon, with an overweight crate, with a vengeful murderer who knew no mercy? What did it matter now that he had got this mystery ship off the Jerry drome? Von Ledder had said he would crucify him. This crate would be his cross.

Ric squeezed the terror out of his heart and flung his ship onto her nose. Immediately, red fire gashed a brilliant tunnel away from the Fokker and faded to saffron. Bullets struck just aft his seat and fell back through the tail as the dive took the steel ship away.

No look was needed to tell that some of those bullets had gone through the armor sheath. Plenty had penetrated. Any one of them would have killed. If he lived longer now, it would be flying skill that saved him.

Viciously, he bucked and banked, keeping Hun guns just off his vitals. Occasionally, he got out of range and ran for it. In this manner, ten miles fell behind. And ten more. Luck came to his rescue when the Jerry's gun jammed. It gave Ric time to find that China Wall of clouds he had sighted from a distance. Now it was almost within reach. Clear below, with a thousand foot ceiling, it stood as grim and opaque as a precipice.

Ric lifted the nose and climbed toward its darkest part. The count divined his intentions and let his crippled gun lie. With the other, he sprayed the fleeing steel tail. Up and up, to the thundrous tumult of two wide-open engines, to the cadence of a snapping Spandau.

A spear of lightning ripped the sable cloud, blinded, vanished. The air shuddered under a thunderclap that sucked the plane in an invisible net. That clutch at the heart again. That split-second when a fighting man must make his choice and live or die by it. Behind, the ceaseless pounding of a maniac's bullets. Ahead, lightning and bruising air currents.

Ric swung himself broadside to the count, leaned his grinning face like a gargoyle over the pit's side while he yelled derisively, and hurled his ship into the cloud.

FIVE minutes he flew in what he thought was a straight line. Flew in darkness that alternated with patches of dirty gray. Then all feeling of flying left him and he knew nothing of where he was or in what position. It's a sensation only flyers can understand, that stomach-wrenching uncertainty that comes after the horizon has been lost.

Then, he was against the side of the pit, held there in the grip of an invisible vice. Twice, he pushed himself away only to be flung back. Once before, he had felt that. In a flat spin in a training plane; a spin, he remembered acutely, that ended in a farmer's hickory grove. With front stick and hard rudder, he tried to break it. Blackness blinded, and he couldn't tell which way the plane revolved.

Thinning mists let in daylight, separated to let him plunge through the cloud's bottom and careen like a stricken eagle toward the earth. But now he could see and fight the spin with accuracy. Aileron and stick and rudder combined to break the deadly rhythm of that rotary plunge. First, he slowed it and then, when a rampant gust teetered his ship straight up on a wingtip, he seized the moment to balk the spin. In a second, with roaring motor, he was level again

and searching the gray air for Count von Ledder.

But the sky was empty.

Now for France and safety. Glimpsing his instrument board, he realized for the first time that his ship had not been fitted with a compass. He hunted the earth for a landmark, but there was none. The whirling descent had confused him and all the dim horizons looked exactly alike.

Without maps, without that homing instinct of a bird, a man is easily lost in the air. Even those who have flown for years. Now, Ric swung this way and that, as befuddled as any child lost in a woods. Calculating wind drift and his own probable approach to the cloud bank, he swung to the left and headed toward what he hoped was the front.

Flying easily, he saw the cloud canopy rupture and let sunshine through in huge shapeless blotches. But what of von Ledder and the Fokker? Had he followed into the clouds and pushed on through, or was he lurking now above one of those holes? Cautiously, Ric dodged the sun spots and dropped earthward until his trucks brushed tree branches. Here, he was only a shadow. If the count were high, he might not sight him. On the other hand, if the German had gone on toward the front, their trails almost certainly would converge.

GERMAN farm land lay below; fields that were flat and even forming ideal emergency dromes. Once, he passed a group of peasant women at work. As he considered turning back and landing to ask for directions, a spire straight ahead caught his eye. In three minutes, he was above it. That spire carried a weather vane, a four-pronged vane with a gleaming arrow above it. The ends of the prongs wore letters N, O, S, W. Ric checked his German . . ." "Nord, Sud, Oest." It was all he needed.

He dropped a wingtip and made a pylon turn around that spire. Wrong by a hundred miles. Now, flying due west, he nursed the throttle to the leanest mixture the motor would swallow.

The cloud ceiling got higher as he traveled. Below, signs of former warfare buckled and blotched the landscape. Old trenches showed like scratches of monster cat claws. Then, to the south, his eyes found a high-riding squadron of planes.

Anxiously, he watched them. They were black slits in a fleece ceiling. Hun ships, without a doubt. His own course paralleled theirs and he kept his silhouettes against the earth. As he watched, one plane dropped and turned back. It worried him until the entire squadron reversed itself and slipped away to the south. It was then that he saw the front, a maze of gouged-out cracks and pits laced together with wire.

Suddenly, he knew where he was. This was his own back yard; that double hump in the distant horizon was the earth fold that protected his own flight's hangar. To the right lay a forest and then a river where von Ledder's old outfit nested. Confident now, with the feel of his position in him, he hiked his nose to ride above the front. The change of position showed a new sector of sky. Above the front and slightly beyond a single ship lay in the heights. Could that be von Ledder? Nervously, he watched it swell into a vague silhouette.

Without warning, a searing torrent of lead poured into his pit. He felt the jar of a direct hit and the blood that followed. Right chest, high up. Full gun and hard rudder skidded the bus out of range. Ric got a glimpse of a Fokker rubbing her nose against his empennage. Got a sight of red fangs that jumped and retreated in a rhythmic dance. The face behind the ring sights was contorted and twisted. A devil's mask it was,

composed of von Ledder's own features.

Now, straight over the front, he was carrying out his promise to crucify the Yank. Somehow, he had got through those clouds and come on to patrol the front. Ric twisted back in his pit and the movement rolled hoops of agony down him. Already, the pit side was a sieve. That he still lived at all was a miracle. Another blast swept onto him, ripping into the engine. Sheet metal fairing shattered and wind whipped it away. The giant Hisso sobbed and coughed and one bank choked, quit.

Ric heard it, heard his last chance of reaching France alive die. A laugh racked his throat, a laugh that flying a valiant challenge at the fate which placed a Yank peelot in a Hun bullet-proof crate and then ironically used that flyer to prove to the Boche that the ship was a dud. Well, things happened like that. He'd read about it in books.

Instinctively, he tried to shuffle off the count's deadly hail. Leaning back in his pit seat, he got ready to die.

A shadow caught his eye. It hung in the sky a mile away. It was the ship he had watched. Closer now, its silhouette was that of a Spad. Raw, primitive hope lifted him half from his pit. Bright light showed the shifting wings and he thought he saw familiar markings. Dixie Smith's own private insignia. "Come on, you cowboy," he screamed. But the ship didn't have a chance to come before von Ledder closed again, with guns that flung a death net.

Ric dropped his nose almost straight down. As resigned and detached as a doctor, he planned his last maneuver. One roaring dive, one final thrust at the killer behind, and then . . . oblivion. Dimly, he realized this was what he had come to France for, what he had expected since his very first dogfight.

Air speed picked up as his heavy plane went earthward. The German hung on, glued to the tail, thrusting his tornado of death through the shivering steel fabric. At two hundred miles, Ric backed the stick and bowed his spars in a gutbunching zoom. Von Ledder split away and Ric turned at the top to find him a hundred feet away, broadside, and a bit lower. With an emma gun, the count would have died on a split of lead. Now, Ric drove his sputtering motor headlong into the Fokker.

Von Ledder saw him coming, saw the consequences of his carelessness before the steel ship reached him. His face grayed as he tried to slide away on a low wing. Ric hit the high wing and crumpled it. As the Fokker spun onto her back, the steel crate dropped against her. Wind locked them together. Spinning, shedding fabric and broken wood, they sank together. Straight into the pitted gulley of No Man's Land.

There's an instinct in a man, planted deep in his motor reflexes, psychologists will tell you, that makes him want to abandon a sinking ship. Ric felt the urge to jump now. When you've got a choice between two sorts of death it isn't bravery to choose either. It's just the stuff you're made of, the elemental warp and woof of the man you claim to be that determines your action. Ric wrapped both hands around crossbraces and stuck to his ship.

FOR a moment, the air was strangely quiet and then the harsh familiar sobbing of a Spad's Hisso ruptured it. Ric found the ship and watched it brush overhead. It was Dixie's. And Dixie Smith's wide-set eyes stared through Army-issue goggles. As it passed, a scream came up from far below. It was Count von Ledder. His body was a ghastly tumbling bundle. As the earth rose to meet it, Ric closed his eyes. The locked planes righted themselves for a moment and glided drunkenly. For a moment, his ship came almost under control.

Then she hit! Ric saw her back break, felt himself smothering as a giant hand hurled him up end over end. When he fell it was in Fokker wreckage.

The memory of von Ledder's scream lingered in his ears, sweetening the bitterness of his failure to get back to St. Omer with this steel dud-ship. Well, an ace for an ace was a fair exchange. Lieutenant Ric Gillette for Count Emil von Ledder. That heat was eating into his flesh, shriveling his eyes. "Please, God. Get it over with," he thought.

Hands were under his armpits. They were dragging him to an accompaniment of crisp Yank oaths that snapped with southern sultriness. Or did he imagine it? He tried to open his eyes but they showed him nothing. Was this dreaming or dying? He'd heard that people dreamed things like this. It wasn't a bad way to die. The heat seemed less.

Then his soul seemed to tear loose from his body. Here was death, surely. He felt the fierce, brief hurt of it, and then a progressive numbness that swept him under its roaring tide. "This is it," he told himself. "I'm glad . . . it's . . . not so hard."

General St. Omer's leathery visage was sober and hard as he handled a fragment of smoke-blackened sheet metal.

"The rest . . . it is gone to our laboratories. Lieutenant Smith," he said. "*Parbleau!* We're finding things, too."

"But it wasn't bullet-proof," Dixie said.

"In spots, though, it did stop bullets. Why was that, *mon ami?* If we can find out, *allors,* we have what the Huns thought they had when they built those steel ships." St. Omer paused and looked at the bandages on Dixie's hands. "*Le bon Dieu,* are you ever to fly again?"

"Next week, sir. The doc's promised I can take these off then."

"*Bravo, mon fils.* I've made recommendations. My country will not forget . . ."

"But I only pulled Ric out of a wreck and picked up that patch of steel," Dixie protested. "He ought to have the medal. He brought that crate close enough for me to get at it."

"But a landing in No Man's Land under fire, isn't that something? *Oui! Mon brave.* But we aren't forgetting Lieutenant Gillette. His will be the . . . Legion d'Honneur."

"Bully," Dixie said. "Say, I'll run over and tell him."

HE went through the door and raced to a low white building with a red cross on its roof. A car stood before it flapping a three star pennon over its hood. He went into the building and pulled up on his heels at the sight of a trio of officers beside Ric's cot. One of them was pinning something on a pajama pocket. The bulky outline was familiar to every Yank who ever saw a newsreel. His voice, low but vibrant, spread through the long room.

"Governments are grateful for men like you and Smith, Gillette. Governments try to tell you—when you live to listen—just how much we value you and how enduring is your service to your country. But words are only words and because a man's love for his country and his service to that country can never be adequately expressed, we've invented a thing called a medal. It stands for all those fine, tender things men want to but cannot tell each other.

"I say to you and I'll say to Lieutenant Smith when I meet him, your bringing that plane out of Germany and his pulling you out of it despite the German fire are twin feats of courage the equal of any this war has revealed. Bless you, son. Get well in a hurry, and when you're back in the air, be careful."

As Dixie retreated softly, he heard Ric say, "But Hell, general, you don't have any fun when you're careful."

LUCKY STIFF

A TRUE FEATURE

By BILL ALEXANDER

YOU can start a fine argument in any group of humans anywhere by bringing up the subject of "luck." The case of Lieutenant Heinrichs, 95th Aero Squadron, A.E.F., will do nicely to prove the point.

To his parents he was Waldo H. Heinrichs. To his coarse-souled companions in the rudder-kicking industry, he was "Heinie."

Heinie's case was the middle of 1917; July, to be exact. At that particular point in the world's history he embarked for France.

Once in France, he made the usual tour; Tours, Avord, Issoudun and Cazeux. The argument on the subject of luck started at Avord. Honor graduates and boys with low foreheads were grouped together at Avord and tossed into the *"rouleur"* class. This class was a game. You were given a forty-five horse power Morane with clipped wings and a big field. Your instructor pointed dramatically at the far end and went through a vocal drill that sounded like the gargle number from Listerine.

If you understood French, the idea was to go the length of the field without letting your wheels lift and without tipping over on your nose. If you didn't understand French, it was the same thing.

Heinie Heinrichs was only one of many who didn't understand; and only one of the many who couldn't do anything about it. It didn't do any good to ask the Frog to repeat. The stuff would sound just as rough the second time.

So he did his best. He pointed his nose at the end of the field and he held her there. That was more than a lot of them did. Many of them thought that the idea was to chase their own tails, a little misunderstanding that sent many Moranes to the shop for new wings. But Heinie made a mistake that was just as bad. He *decolléed*. In other words, he let his plane lift. He got off the ground with it and settled safely again.

Flushed with triumph, he came back to the instructor to find that gentleman tearing his hair. It was all wrong. By the little blue pig of the Rue Royale, it was as wrong as two left feet. One should not do the *decollet* in *rouleur* school. Nevair!

OPEN mouthed, Heinie heard this recital of his sins. He had no idea of what the instructor meant but he promised to do better. With set jaw he faced down the field. If this Frog wanted him to fly this silly little ship, he'd do it or bust his neck. He had thought that he went high enough the first time, but if the Frog didn't like it, he'd see what he could do.

He did go higher and the Frenchman called upon his saints. If he was so anxious to *decollé* before he knew how to taxi his plane, then by all whiskers of the twelve holy apostles, he should go to the *decollet* class.

Heinie went. Behind him he left a sweating group that was doomed to struggle weary hours with the intricacies of *rouleur* while he advanced. That is where he was first called "a lucky stiff."

Finishing up on *decollet* and the two *pique* classes, Heinie went on to the altitude tests. The idea here was

to get up to 2000 meters and stay up for an hour. Heinie got the idea all right, but the plane didn't.

The prop came off at 1800 and the pearly gates swung open. Cadets just naturally didn't bring ships down with no prop; the ships brought them down. But Heinie was lucky. He brought the ship down.

He started to settle right over a flock of sheep and that would have been messy. He missed them and landed in a bean patch. It made him a figure of note and consequence. Cheerful back-patters sought him out and poured the salve to him.

"Nothing will happen to you, old boy," they said boisterously. "With your luck, the Germans won't have a chance."

He went on to Issoudun where the boys had a nice racket worked up. This was known, in technical parlance, as chateauing. One went out on *petits voyages* and one developed engine trouble. *Voilà!* One landed near a lovely old chateau and one became an honored guest of grateful French citizens. One had things from the cellar and met beautiful daughters and enjoyed *beaucoup* hospitality.

Uh-huh. A few *bons pilotes* did that and then the lid came down. Officers got granite faces at the mention of forced landings near chateaux. There was a war on and this chateauing stuff was out.

Into this happy condition came Heinie. He knew naught of rackets nor the guile of flying men. He was a young aviator trying to get along. He flew his triangles conscientiously but his plane had been trained by a reprobate. The magneto became dud at an inauspicious moment and the pilot had to seek the earth. He landed near a chateau.

"The lucky stiff! He gets a real dud engine over a chateau and gets treated like a king. He doesn't even have to do any faking with his luck."

THE schools finished with Waldo H. Heinrichs and he wore the wings and rated salutes. He went out with the 95th Squadron on the patrol line between Chalons and Rheims. It was an exceptionally quiet sector but Heinrichs had a combat with a German scout in his first week. Maybe this was lucky. Anyway, those who didn't get a chance to swap lead claimed that it was.

He went down to Chemin des Dames, then to the St. Mihiel sector. He was used to the Front and to front-line flying by now and there was less talk of luck. He was a crack pursuit pilot in a crack squadron, one that included such intrepid souls as John Mitchell, Quentin Roosevelt, Sumner Sewell, E. C. Buckley, Bill Taylor and L. C. Holden. There was a race for leadership in victories scored, with the 94th as the leading opponent. At the time, 95 was in the lead. Every one was doing his share.

Heinrichs was patrolling west of Apremont one bright morning in May when he saw a German two-seater below him, dusting hell-for-leather home after a sortie of some sort into Allied territory. The chances were that this Hun had broken some of the United States laws against taking pictures over territory occupied by the military. Heinie had no intention of letting a German get away with that. One picture taker could cost a thousand lives.

Dropping the nose of his Nieuport, Heinrichs went down on the tail of the two-seater, firing long bursts as he hurtled down the sky. A startled gunner made an attempt to swing the rear cockpit gun on its ring and died without firing a shot. The pilot, turning for a startled look back, never faced front again. With a drunken lurch the two-seater heeled over and plunged to oblivion.

In the mad thrill of the moment, Heinrichs forgot the fact that he was flying a Nieuport and forgot the fury of that wild dive down the sky. He

eased back on the stick and came around.

The controls felt weird and he gave a startled look out of the cockpit. His heart flipped over. The fabric had rolled back off his upper right wing along its entire length. He shot a look at the other wing. The fabric was flapping in the wind and peeling rapidly off the leading edge.

It was an appropriate moment for a soft rendition of Tosti's "Good-by Forever"; but the man who had landed a propless plane in cadet days did not quit now. Throttling his engine down, he decided to make a fight for it.

His direction was fixed by the fates and he dared not alter it now. It was up to him to save the ship strain if possible. He was headed for his own lines and that was something to be thankful for. Tight, alert, he rode the crippled plane and played on the controls as a master plays on a violin.

Steadily he settled toward the earth and the front lines loomed ahead of him. Archie was ranging him and he had to sit there tight lipped and take it. No maneuvering out now. He had to fly straight through it. He did.

The sky blazed to the right and the left of him but he was unhit. He cleared the lines. Long shadows had fallen across the earth and it was quite dark on the lower levels. The Allied trenches rolled behind him and a ravine loomed like a dark pocket before him. It had been used by the observation balloon crew up till recently. It was fairly level but he couldn't see. He came in.

THERE was a crash and a rattling, cracking roar; then everything in France seemed to fall on the hapless airman. Waldo Heinrichs passed out. When he came to, some artillerymen were taking care of him and apart from a headache and a few bruises, he was unhurt. The rap on the head had knocked him out, but his bones had stood the shock. He went back to his squadron.

In June, the 95th went up to Chateau Thierry where they flew the patrol line from Rheims to Soissons. Heinrichs won the croix de guerre on this Front and there wasn't any luck about that. Then came the climax of a career that bristled with drama.

On September 18, in company with Lieutenant John Mitchell, Heinrichs ran into a flight of six Fokkers led by Lothar Richthofen, younger brother of the Red Baron.

The Americans were caught by surprise and the sky was full of Germans before they were aware of the proximity of foes.

Mitchell fired one burst at a German who was trying for his tail. The German veered off, but Mitchell's guns were useless; hopelessly jammed, both of them.

Heinrichs was having his hands full with two Germans but he was giving them all that they could handle, too. He saw his comrade make a wild bid for life and saw two Germans go after him. Then a burst ruined his own engine and two more Fokkers curved across the sky to the aid of the two he was fighting.

It was a tough box for an engineless pilot but even as his engine died he saw one of his opponents wither and burst into flame. One of his own bursts had gone home. That left him a hole and he tried desperately to take it before the two new opponents got into action. His remaining foe was blazing at him and he banked to the left out of the hail of lead.

On small decisions does the fate of fighting men rest.

The nearer of the two reinforcements was coming in from the left and, at the precise second that the American turned, the German pilot fired a preliminary burst. Heinrichs banked right into it.

There was a moment, then, of supreme horror and shock to the American. It seemed to him that he was being literally blasted out of the sky.

HEINRICHS had no idea of where he was hit and it is no wonder that he didn't. Ten German bullets had found their mark in his body simultaneously.

His left heel was shattered and so was his right ankle. There was a bullet in his left thigh and another in his left arm. One bullet had ploughed through his left elbow and shattered the arm above and below the joint. Two explosive bullets had roared through his right hand and one had glanced off his left shoulder. An explosive bullet had entered his cheek and had exploded in his mouth; breaking both jaws, knocking out fifteen teeth and tearing out the right side of his face.

Mangled thus, he went into a spin. For 3000 feet he spun with his mind indifferent; then he snapped out of it and managed by some miracle of will to right his plane. With one arm hanging limp and shattered and with the other wounded in two places, he loosened his straps and climbed out of his machine; that is, he got to the edge of the cockpit and fell to the ground.

Gamely struggling to keep conscious against the death that he felt was closing on him, Heinrichs pulled himself erect and, agonizingly, dragged his matches from his pockets. True to the traditions of the U. S. Air Corps, he was trying to destroy his plane before capture. Reeling back, he was struck down by a German infantryman.

He was left lying where he had fallen for over an hour and consciousness refused to leave him. Staring up at the sky, he saw a flight of Spads pass overhead but his plane had been removed and he knew that the men at the controls of the American ships could not see him. Not that it mattered. But those men had called him lucky.

After a long while, stretcher bearers came and hauled him to a field dressing station. He was regarded as a living dead man there and systematically looted of all his personal possessions, even to his boots, damaged though they were.

Eventually, through his stubborn refusal to die in the field, he reached the hospital at Metz. Three German doctors and six nurses were trying to take care of 600 patients in that hospital without oil or disinfectants or cotton. Paper bandages were all that were available and there was a limit to what three doctors could accomplish. It was ten days before Heinrichs had his jaw taken care of, but his will refused to allow his body to die.

Two months later the Allies took Metz and the hospital staff cleared out with the German troops, leaving the Allied wounded behind them without water, medicine or records of treatment. Heinrichs was found by W. H. Willims of the Y.M.C.A., the first American in Metz, and removed to the hospital at Tours.

He had been listed on the records as "killed in action" and his comrades were startled when word reached them that he had survived. Letters of congratulation poured into the hospital at Tours and many of them started "You lucky stiff!" Moreover, the papers got the story and one New York paper reached Heinrichs which bore a headline "Luckiest American Flyer." It went on to recount the miraculous escape from death, etc., etc.

Flat on his back in the hospital at Tours, Heinrichs read these expressions of amazement and of good-will. His mind traveled back to the picture of the man he had been and to the time that he had turned left by blind chance when he might have turned right. His lips twisted wryly. He was going to get well, the doctors said—but how well? He sighed.

"It seems to me," he said, "that a man has to be awfully unlucky to have as much luck as I have."

THIS IS THE MEETING PLACE OF THE "WAR BIRDS" FLYING CLUB. EACH MONTH NEWS OF THE ORGANIZATION AND MEMBERS WILL BE DISCUSSED.

WINGS FOR WAR BIRDS

THERE, Gentlemen, is the slogan for the month. Does the old adjutant seem too polite this meeting? Well, it just can't be helped. Since getting a slant at the silver glint of our official pin, I'm just bubbling over with dignity. Boys, that pin is a honey.

When this meeting adjourns, the first thing you want to do is to make a bee-line for the mail box. Your pin is up here at the new H.Q. shack—149 Madison Avenue, N. Y. C. The skipper has instructed me to mail out the pins as fast as orders are received. You get the exact cost price of production with no wholesale, retail, jobber, distributor or other profit added. You lay—what do you suppose?—just fifteen cents on the line. That pin is silver plated, too.

Yezzir. For three little nickels, you get the classiest lapel pin that you ever flipped an eye on—spreading wings with WAR BIRDS on the center shield. Only commissioned members of The WAR BIRDS, of course, can have them. Name, address and squadron number must accompany each application. If any of you lads at this meeting have not yet qualified, act fast and get your application in for the War Birds examination. As soon as your commission has been signed, you are eligible for wings.

Some of you have been cracking down with a great idea. You have, of course, taken the WAR BIRDS post idea to your hearts as we expected that you would and many of you are busy organizing. That is great. Some of you have been designing individual town and state insignia.

Now that's hot. Our mail has contained a number of designs lately that were better than good and when you consider that every squadron in France designed its own insignia, you can appreciate how logical the idea is. Only we never thought of it up here; you did. If you'll ride right after that and get busy on squadron insignia as soon as you get your groups and posts organized, we'll surprise you one of these days and devote an entire section of this magazine to reproductions of the designs and dope about the lads who organized the posts and designed the insignia.

Two more things and we're through. Don't forget the correspondence club. We'll list the names of members who wish to correspond and who are willing to welcome travelling WAR BIRDS who stop off along the way. We ask only that those who promise to write, actually do it. "A promise made is a debt un-

paid" and unpaid debts lead to court-martial. Watch it!

And that's enough, Ye Adjutant.

NOTES OF THE WAR BIRDS

A complication has developed since we first announced that this page would be given over to news, notes, decorations and promotions.

We were a little bit disappointed to find that there were WAR BIRDS who refused to join posts if other WAR BIRDS were in command; the objectors figuring that the commanders would have higher rank. That's something that calls for consideration. Let us get it straight.

We are going to grant rank to commanders. Any group commander will rate promotion who can report six commissioned members of WAR BIRDS as assembled in one post provided the post is regularly organized, has a regular meeting schedule, an insignia and a name. His rank for a six to ten member post will be "Captain" provided that he sends in a notice of his election as Post Commander signed by each of the post members. For an eleven to twenty member post, the commander's rank will be "Major" and he will be entitled to one Captain under his command. Lest this seem to make the higher rank available only to men in the larger towns, we wish to add that a six member post can qualify by special service as an A-1 post, giving it the same rank privileges as the larger post.

Got all that? Okay. Now for the sorehead stuff. Somebody has to swing rank and some of the finest aces of the war never commanded a squadron. Ball never did, nor Guynemer, nor Fonck, nor Rickenbacker. Few in fact of the really great went high in rank. Greatness and authority do not necessarily go together; they are different things altogether.

"But," writes one alarmed member, "I have gone to a lot of trouble in stirring up interest in the post idea and have one started here—now some of the other fellows are getting together to make another fellow the commander."

On the face of it, that is tough. But lads capable of qualifying for WAR BIRDS have good judgment and there is probably a lot behind this case and others like it that may come up. The boys probably figure that the other lad would make a better leader. But we want to be fair and we want to reward work where work is done.

In cases like the one above, we think that the organizer rates a reward. If his post says that he does, he gets it; no matter who gets the rank. And there will be ways worked out for passing on citations sent in by Post Commanders.

The main thing is to get the posts organized—then all the rest will follow. And that's that.

OFFICERS' MEETING PLACE

NO decorations this trip. Just honorable mention. Some of these lads may rate later.

Lieutenant John Littwin, Jr., Chicago, Ill., comes through with the idea of making up plans of war planes for interested members. Maybe we can do this, too. What's the vote?

Lieutenant Edwin Duryer, Tilton, N. H., sends in a suggestion for a mighty clever insignia and reports that he was offered fifty cents for his booklet on War Planes which WAR BIRDS sent out for a thin nickel. Several other members have reported interest by outsiders in our booklets and attempts to buy them. Don't sell them. Tell them where they can get them and try to make members of them. And by the way, we have reprinted those booklets several times to meet the heavy demand. The present supply is short. If you haven't got the four booklets on "War Planes," "Archy," "Synthetic Aces" and "Plane Facts," you'd better send your twenty cents to the Adjutant and get them right away. And what do you fellows think of another series

of booklets? Would you buy them? And what subjects would you like? On the insignia, Lieutenant Duryer, you'd better get a post organized. It's about the only way to use it.

The same answer on insignia to Lieut. Ted Wilson of Lake Forest, Ill., who sent in a nice design for his state.

Lieutenant George Hurst who organized the first WAR BIRDS post sends in an impressive list of members; nearly all pilots and one of them a flyer with war experience. This Shelbyville, Indiana, bunch has snap and hustle to them. They own an Eaglerock plane and they have a long start on a great post out there. We'll run that roster, lieutenant, when we get the squadron name and a signed report on the vote for Commander.

Lieutenant Patrick Friscia, 218 Grand Street, New York City, suggests an annual dance in the big town —a WAR BIRD affair. It might go over. We suggest that those organizing posts in Manhattan consider a general yearly get-together.

Lieutenant Robert Jahnke is another Chicagoan who has a nice insignia idea. Get a Post on the way, Lieutenant. He also cracks a request for names of WAR BIRDS. Watch for the correspondence club column. That ought to do it.

Lieut. G. von Trabbold, Laurel Springs, N. J., reports that he is organizing a post called the Flying Fox squadron and includes a well done drawing of his insignia. Follow through, Lieutenant. We'd like to have a Yank WAR BIRD Post commanded by a lad with a "Von" on his name. Swell.

PROMOTIONS

ROBERT D. HATCHER, 2nd Lieut. Squadron 2, Annapolis, Maryland to 1st Lieut. Effective immediately. Valuable suggestions.

ROBERT L. MEADE, Jr., 2nd Lieut. Squadron 37, Galveston, Texas. 1st Lieut. Effective immediately. Valuable suggestions.

V. BURNERT, 2nd Lieut. Squadron 17, St. Louis, Mo. 1st Lieut. Effective immediately. Valuable suggestions.

JOHN P. SCHAFER, 2nd Lieut. Waterbury, Conn. 1st Lieut. Effective March 1st. Meritorious service.

There's the bugle. Lights out!

WING COMMANDER, March '34
149 MADISON AVE.,
NEW YORK.

I hereby apply for membership in *WAR BIRDS*. I understand that I must successfully pass the required examinations to qualify and I promise to obey the rules of the organization if successful in winning my wings.

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Pilot? ..... Street or P.O. Box.....

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If booklets are requested, mark X here and enclose five cents for postage for each booklet. They will help you pass your examinations. I enclose 15c. for my WAR BIRDS wings. My rank is.....
My squadron number is .....

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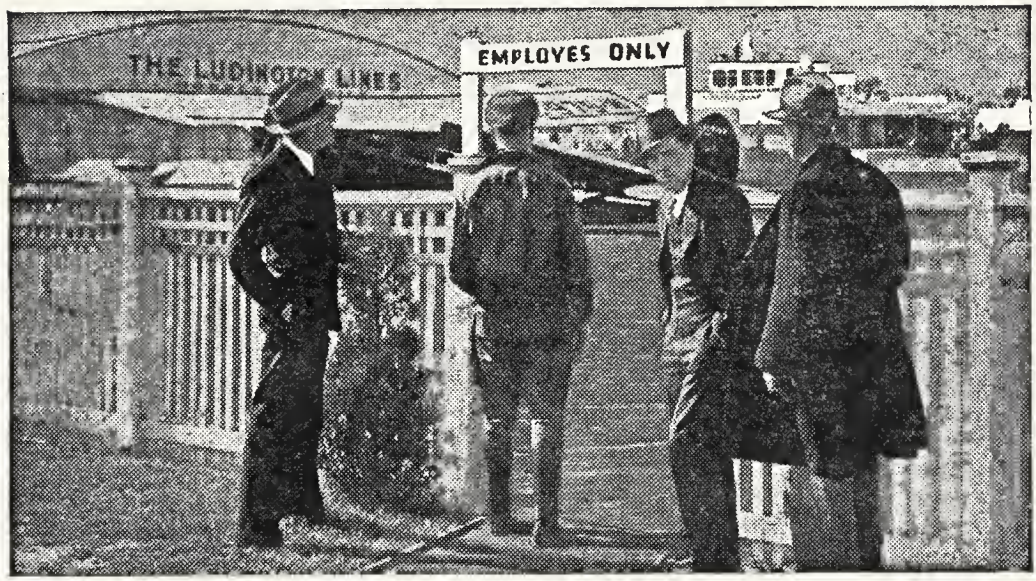

and Yet Ambitious Men are Getting In! The Question is: "Are YOU Ambitious?"

COMMERCIAL Aviation is one of the very few industries that has grown in spite of the depression. A few years from now every town will have its airport or flying field. Air lines will cover the country like the railroads do today. Aviation is due for a big BOOM! It offers a lot, a great future, to men who train themselves for a place in it.

Right today, ambitious men who know something about airplanes and aviation as a business are getting through that gate you see up there. There's the same chance open to you, provided you'll do what most of them did—back yourself with training.

It doesn't matter what branch of Aviation appeals to you. Whether it's flying or a job on the ground—plenty of places will be open to the right men—the *trained* men. The question is—ARE YOU AMBITIOUS? Will you make the effort to make good?

Don't think that to learn aviation you must leave home, or give up your job. At small cost, I'll give you the important fundamental "ground work" knowledge of Aviation that employers want. I give you this training right at home—by a home-study course that many other ambitious men have used and proved. The course is easy to understand—hundreds of photos, charts and diagrams make everything clear. In it I've packed the knowledge gained from eighteen years of practical experience and over 400,000 miles of flying. Send for my FREE book explaining everything—How I train you, what opportunities are open to you, and much more. Fill in the coupon and mail it today.

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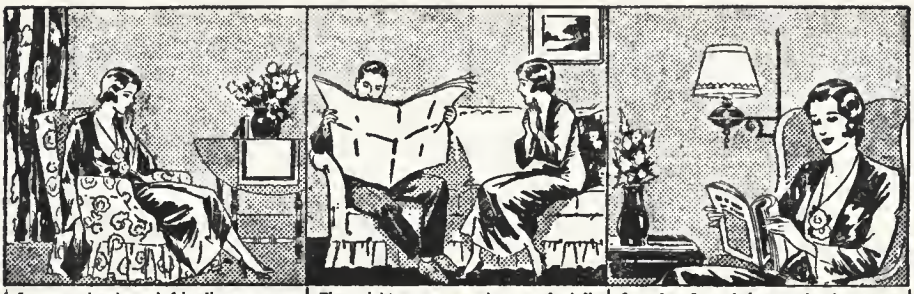

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29x5.25-19		2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.15
30x5.50-20		3.35	1.15
31x5.50-21		3.40	1.15
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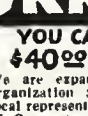

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Now a Doctor has dared to tear away the veil of mystery that hides the facts behind homosexuality. In blunt understandable words he describes the unbelievable facts. "STRANGE LOVES, A Study In Sexual Abnormalities," by Dr. La Forest Potter, noted authority, is a document so weird, so startling, as to amaze the civilized world. Dr. Potter says, "NO MAN ON EARTH HAS A CHANCE AGAINST A WOMAN ONCE SHE HAS SUCCUMBED TO ANOTHER WOMAN." A startling, provocative indictment against the false modesty that has been responsible for the growth of these fantastic strange amatory curiosities among savage and civilized races.

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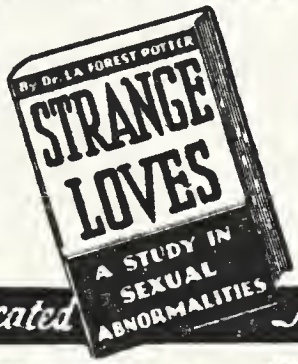

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There are literally thousands of old coins and bills that we want at once and for which we will pay big cash premiums. Many of these coins are now passing from hand to hand in circulation. Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. Watch your change. Know what to look for.

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The Ground Almond has a flavor that is MOST EXCELLENT, resembling the cocoanut. The meat is snow white, covered with a shell or skin of brown color. It grows close to the surface and anything from 200 to 300 Almonds may be expected from a single nut. There is no trouble whatever in growing anywhere and in any kind of soil. May be planted any time, and in eight or ten weeks from time of planting you will have an ENORMOUS CROP of the MOST DELICIOUS ALMONDS YOU EVER TASTED. **Seeds 15c Pkt.**

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A Graceful Ornamental Conservatory Plant

Easily Grown From Seed Winter or Summer

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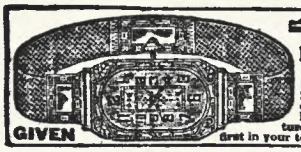

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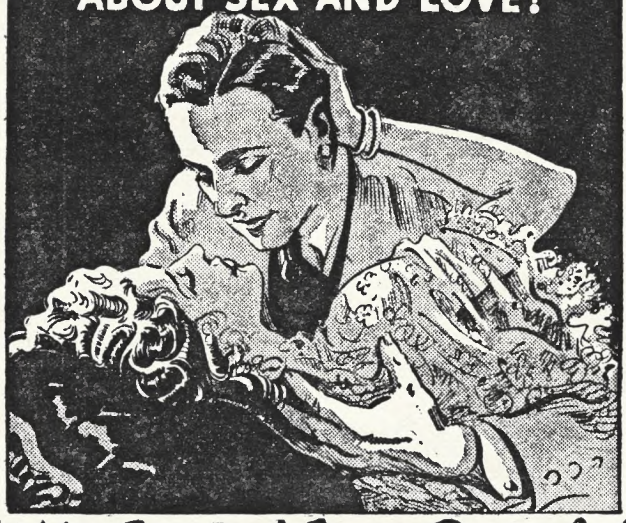

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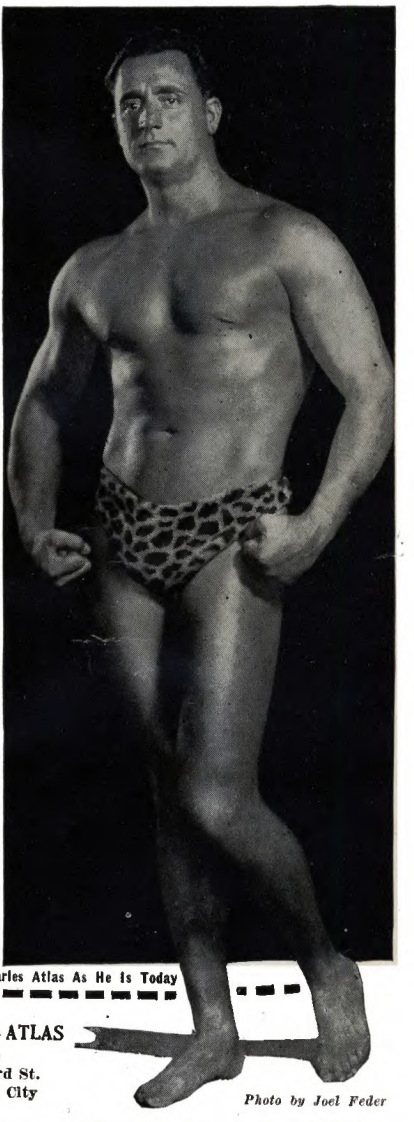

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